Chrome Shelled Regios Volume1

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These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 1

鋼殻のレギオス

大地の実りから見捨てられた世界。

異形の汚染獣たちが都市の周りを闊歩し、人類は、それ自体が意識を持ち、歩行する〈自律型移動都市〉で暮らす。

その中の一つ、学園都市ツェルニの新入生レイフォンは一般科の学生だったが、入学式の騒動で生徒会長に才能を見抜かれ、武芸科へ転科するはめになる。

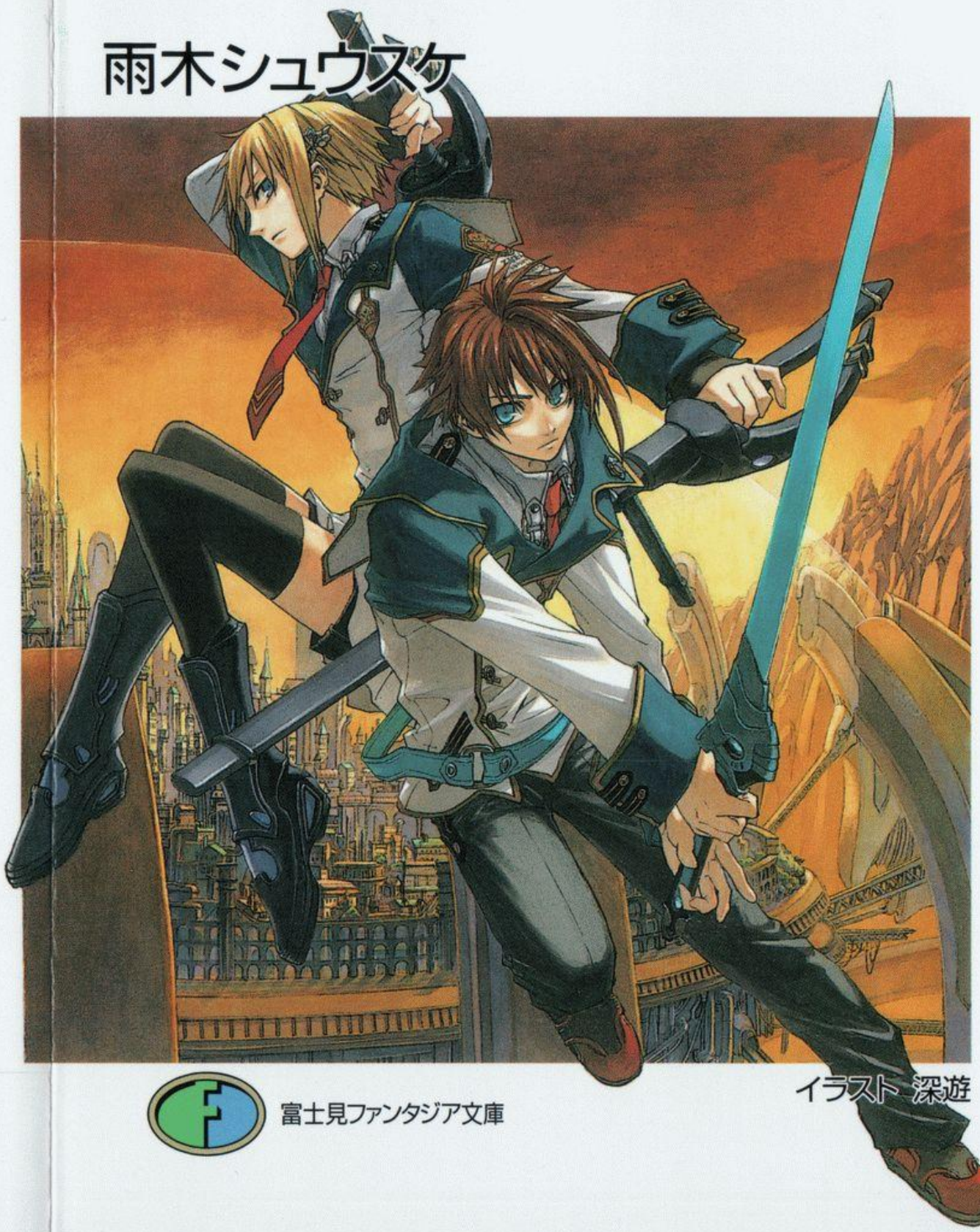
ツェルニでも汚染獣からの攻撃に備え、選抜された者たちが自衛小隊を組んでいた。そのまま勝ち気な少女・ニーナの小隊に配属されるレイフォン。しかし彼には剣を持てない理由があった……。

戦いを捨てた少年が、ひとりの少女と出会い——奇跡を生む。

史上最強の学園アクション・ファンタジーが開幕！

鋼殻のレギオス

雨木シュウスケ



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少女は巨人と踊る

少女は聖霊と歌う

少女は蒼剣と語る

少女は世界と歩む

そして少女は慈しむ

鋼殻のレギオス

「行くよ」
情けない気分のまま、
レイフォンはトランクケースを握り締め
リーリンに背を向けた。
「待って」
細い声がレイフォンの足を止めさせた。
それからは一瞬の出来事のように感じられた。

鋼殻のレギオス

「わたしは本気で行くぞ」
空気を引きちぎるような音をさせて、ニーナが右手の鉄鞭(てつべん)を振るった。
レイフォンはあくまでも無言のまま頷いた。
剣を構える。
いきなりだ。
間の計りあいもなにもなく、いきなりニーナが飛び込んできた。

間近でそれを見て、レイフォンは言葉を失ってしまった。
発光体の正体は、小さな子供だった。
《これが、都市の意識？》

Prologue

Everyone held their breath, to seal the flood of terror rising in their throats.

"....."

Nina did the same.

Sitting at the back of the bus, she looked out of the window, peering past the short, fat businessman sitting before her with his head tucked beneath a pair of trembling arms. On the other side of the dirt-smeared window was a vast wilderness. Cracks crept across the parched ground. Jagged shards of earth rose towards the sky. A tall, dark mountain loomed before Nina.

But everyone on the bus knew it wasn't a mountain.

"That's.....Blitzen," murmured a man sitting in the middle of the bus. He observed the dark shape through a pair of binoculars. Nina could see big drops of sweat on his face, his large Adam's apple bobbing as he gulped nervously.

Nina squinted at the dark shape. It wasn't a mountain. It was a city. What looked like a mountain peak was in fact the top of a tower. Atop that tower was a tattered flag, fluttering in the wind. Nina couldn't make out the crest on the flag that carried the city's name. She couldn't confirm if the city's name was indeed what the man had uttered.

A strong gust of wind struck the bus, rocking it.

"Hey!"

Startled and surprised, the passengers bent over in their seats and held their heads down. They curled up, instinctively trying to hide. Instead of covering her head like everyone else, Nina held her breath and continued to stare at the city, trying to see any kind of reaction from it.

The city was already dead.

The bus squatted on its legs, immobile.

The buildings in the city were also dead. Terrible wounds were carved into most of the buildings near the city's edge. Nina could see that a part of the city's rim had been gouged away, creating a mountain of debris. Columns of smoke rose everywhere. The attack must have happened recently.

It would be impossible to find any survivors just by looking at the city from the bus. Nor could Nina get to it to see if anyone was still alive. The bus was weak and insignificant outside the city. Nina knew that probably there weren't any survivors; humans couldn't breathe without the air shield around the city, and this city had lost its shield.

Next to her, Harley said in an anxious voice, "Nina..."

"Don't worry. We haven't been discovered."

Nina realized her voice was trembling. She felt compelled to lick her lips, but she suppressed that desire and gazed resolutely at

the attackers hovering in the sky above the city. Even though her mouth was dry, cold sweat broke out on her skin.

"This is the world we live in, Harley," she said to her childhood friend, but she did not get a response from him.

The effortless movements of the cruel attackers above the city made them look regal. The attackers...they were called the Kings of Nature — filth monsters. They flew lower, flying slowly between buildings.

"Now!" someone roared shrilly.

The driver started the engine. The legs of the bus rose, raising the body upward.

Nina's line of sight rose with it. The bus began to hop, moving away from the stricken city. It was better to leave this place. The bus continued to run. Nina looked back at the shrinking city.

After they had put some distance between the bus and the city, Harley sighed. "It's safe now."

As the tension in the bus eased, Nina clenched her fists tightly and said "...We're so weak."

The sound of huge feet trampling the ground at the edge of the city rang in the ears of people. The footsteps of the city drowned out all other sounds — even the furious roar of the wind.

"Are you still not giving up?"

It came from a voice loud enough to be heard over this din.

A girl spoke to a boy in the city's roaming bus station. Strong winds shook her golden hair. Her clear blue pupils looked directly at the boy. Her youthful face, which made her look younger than she really was, was full of disapproval and unease. She gazed at the boy standing at the bus stop.

Looking troubled, the boy kept glancing back and forth between the girl and the bus waiting to depart. A chain held up the long multi-legs of the bus that were folded and bent. The body of the bus swayed along with the movement of the city, bumping against a cushion pad. Since it was dangerous when the city moved, the driver and all the passengers were staying in the small waiting area. This kind of bus was built to withstand up and down shaking , but it couldn't stop from swaying sideways.

"Layfon!"

The only passenger not yet in the waiting area – Layfon, looked away from the bus. He had tea-colored hair and blue eyes. His face showed an expression that came from the loss of adolescence. This look was now coupled with a powerless smile.

"Even so, I can't stay here anymore, Leerin."

Layfon didn't raise his voice, so Leerin stepped closer. Even with her expressive eyes right in front of him, Layfon didn't feel attracted to his childhood friend.

"But-! You didn't have to pick a school that was so far away!"

"Even here....." Again, the sound of the city's movement drowned him out. A strong gust of wind blew past them. Layfon reached out and placed a hand on Leerin's shoulder to steady her.

"It can't be helped. The only place that gave me a scholarship was Zuellni. The orphanage's money can't be spent on me, right?"

"You must have forced yourself to choose such a distant place. There are closer places you could have gone to. If you took the scholarship qualification exam next year, you could find a school that's closer, right? Then you could stay here with me..."

It didn't matter what words came next; nothing could change Layfon's mind. To emphasize that point, he shook his head slowly.

"I can't give up on leaving."

Leerin held her breath. He couldn't bear looking at the pain in her clear eyes, so he looked at his hand on her shoulder. His hand was like that of an old man, hard and rough.

"I've made my decision and I won't change my mind. Nobody wanted it to be like this, not even me. But Her Majesty wants me to experience the outside world. Besides, she doesn't wish for my presence here."

"I wish for it!"

This time, Leerin's powerful and persuasive words caused Layfon to hold his breath.

"Is it not enough that it's my wish?"

To Layfon, Leerin's crying gaze and words were too cunning. He tried to find some words to pass it over, but couldn't find any. He felt pain, pressuring him to convey his feelings.

Layfon's lips trembled, as did Leerin's.

They were each trying to find the right words to say.

In the end, they realized that the right words to say didn't exist. No matter who wanted Layfon to stay, nothing could change the fact that he was leaving. Layfon himself didn't intend to stay, and there was nothing that would change that. And if he tried to make Leerin agree with him, there was no doubt she would be hurt.

A shrill whistle sounded behind him.

As if it was trying to tear the two apart, the simple sound of the whistle squeezed between the noise of the city's footsteps and the furious howl of the wind, echoing through the bus station. It was a

warning that the bus was about to depart. The driver, having blown the whistle, entered the bus. He started the engine. A vibration, different from the city's, radiated out from the battered body of the bus. The passengers in the waiting area took their luggage and headed for the vehicle.

Layfon's lips stopped trembling. He took away his hand from Leerin to pick up the suitcase beside his feet. That was all he had with him now. His other belongings would be given to the kids at the orphanage or tossed away.

"I have to go," he said to the teary-eyed Leerin. As if feeling that this was a truth she couldn't change, Leerin's trembling also stopped.

She gazed at him with reddened eyes.

"Since the decision has been made, I want to start anew. I can't return to the orphanage or to Her Majesty's side. It's the price I must pay for my actions. I'll make up for them any way I can. But nobody wants that; they just want me to disappear. Even so, things can't be resolved with just my going away....."

He couldn't keep talking. He didn't want to lie. But even if he were to tell the truth it'd only sound like an excuse. He hated himself for acting like that.

"Even so, I haven't really made up my mind."

He added weakly, "Though I really want to start over in many areas....."

"Enough!" Leerin cut him off coldly. Layfon held his luggage tightly, not daring to look at her.

The driver blew his whistle again. The bus would be leaving soon.

"I'm going now."

Dejected, he turned his back to Leerin.

"Wait!"

The small voice stopped him.

What happened next was a single, brief moment.

Leerin grabbed ahold of Layfon's shoulder and forced him to turn around. Her face was so very close to his.

It was only for a moment that they overlapped.

The rough but soft pressure overwhelmed Layfon. In that swift moment while he was numb and spaced out, Leerin jumped away. Her smile was stiff but that meaningful look of having played a prank was familiar to him.

"You have to send letters though. I don't think everyone wants you gone," she said before running away. Looking at her figure flying past in a flurry of skirts, Layfon realized why he felt so strange.

Ah, I see..... because she's wearing a skirt.....

The lively Leerin didn't like to wear skirts, but she was wearing one today. And there was also the sweet and soft feeling left on his lips by that swift moment. As if to feel the warmth left on them, he touched a finger to his lips.

So naive...

While mocking himself, he hurried to the bus.

I'll write when I get there.

Yes. He had decided.

The bus started moving. Wishing to take one last look at the scene, Layfon sat in the last row, gazing at the city he had spent his entire life in till now.

Regios could be seen in every corner of the world. The existence of these cities was as natural as breathing air. Numerous buildings were built on a flat circular surface, growing shorter as they ranged out from the center of the city where the tallest buildings were located. Located beneath the table were legs — huge metallic legs clustered together. With precise movements those legs walked together, as if to take the city far away from the roaming bus.

Layfon gazed at the center of the city, where the city's tallest tower stood.

The huge flag atop that building billowed. On its field was a dragon with the body of a lion that seemed to be breaking a sword with its teeth, but the sword was unyielding. The flag with that crest weaved into it danced a wild dance in the wind.

Layfon stared at that huge flag, wondering what the first line of his letter to Leerin would be about.

Chapter 1: School begins

It's been a month since we parted ways and I've finally reached Zuellni. I got here just in time for the opening ceremony. There were five bus changes before I got here; living in a single city back then, I never realized how hard traveling could be. Getting to another city isn't easy, since all cities move according to their own desires. I never understood why the ancient alchemists made the cities self-aware. But now I see that it was done so they could avoid filth monsters and protect us. I understand that now.

During the trip, some filth monsters passed by my bus. Their cruel and dangerous appearance was horrifying. The thought of being attacked on a bus with no way to escape was enough to make all my hairs stand on end.

But don't worry, our bus didn't get attacked. I think our driver was quite the professional. He stopped the bus for three days to avoid discovery. At that time, my heart ached. It's scary enough to be attacked by the filth monsters. Compared to that though, it would have been worse if the bus was damaged and marooned on this dry and scarlet earth. That would've been a death sentence. Even so, in the end I reached Zuellni safely.

I'm writing this letter in my dorm room. It's a double, but luckily I don't have a roommate. I've never had a room all to myself. I'm really happy about this.

How are you doing over there? Getting used to your new life?

I just realized that I still don't know your address. I'll send the letter to your school. I hope it gets to your hands safely. It'd be great if you could include your new address in your response. After all, the head wouldn't want to see my letters going to the orphanage now.

Well –

I wish eternal peace for your new life and the city you're standing on.

To my dear Leerin Marfes,

Layfon Alseif

The mobile cities, Regios, are spread across the world in their myriad forms. From the basic, standard form that provides everything necessary for human survival, to forms that specialize in specific areas.

One of those forms is the Academy City.

Zuellni – Academy City Zuellni.

The school buildings in the center of the city provided facilities for all study areas.

Large groups of students were heading for the great hall, which was large enough to accommodate all the students inside.

Dressed casually, General Studies students walked as they chatted with friends.

Uneasy smiles sat on the faces of Agricultural and Mechanical Engineering students, who weren't used to the uniforms they hadn't put on in a long time.

The Alchemy and Medical students wore dirty white coats on top of their uniforms.

The Military Arts students, unlike the others, marched towards the hall with heads held high.

Students with different characteristics were all swallowed into the hall.

The purpose of this autonomous city was to exist for and be used by its students. Today, it was holding an entrance ceremony to welcome its new first years.

But it looked like the ceremony would be delayed.

An hour later.

Layfon stood with a confused expression on his face.

"Anyway, shall we sit down and talk?"

"Ye-Yes!"

Having given a tense answer, he still couldn't sit on the sofa as requested.

The student before him sat at a large business desk. Unlike Layfon, he had an air of maturity about him. Silvery-white hair framed an elegant face bearing a gentle expression, but his calm silver eyes seemed to be judging Layfon.

That piercing gaze of his caused Layfon to dart his gaze around in panic. Through his shoes, he could feel the softness of the carpet beneath him. The sofa and table used for meetings sat before him. Bookshelves lined one of the walls, filled with informative scrolls.

Before Layfon entered this room, he had seen a plaque with the words "Student President" carved into it next to the doors.

"I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Karian Loss, a sixth year student."

Students were enrolled for six years in Zuellni, so Loss was in the highest grade.

And he was also the Student President.

The person in charge of this school.

"I'm Layfon Alseif."

With a straight back, Layfon clearly delivered his name. He felt cold sweat beading on his forehead.

Karian smiled.

They were alone in the room.

"I wasn't planning on punishing you."

The voice tinged with a bitter smile helped Layfon to calm down. He'd been tense the whole time, as he had no idea why he had been summoned to this room.

"First, let me convey my gratitude. Because of your help, none of the new students were injured."

The opening ceremony was cancelled because of a commotion.

Two Military Arts students coming from enemy cities had met by chance before the ceremony, resulting in the commotion. They went from staring to quarreling and eventually to fighting.

Military Arts – Different special powers that were born to protect humanity from harm on this polluted earth.

The Military Arts is the field meant to foster such special power users.

If people fought each other seriously using such powers, if worst came to worst, even normal students could have suffered injuries or been killed. In Karian's eyes was genuine gratitude.

"The new rule that only allows new students to be armed after half a year is because some of them don't understand where they now are.....This is unbearable. It's a huge amount of work for me to settle things every year."

But, there were still people who used weapons. Sometimes a fight could turn into a battle that would draw blood.

To the Student President who had been smiling bitterly but talking in a straightforward and frank manner, Layfon could only respond confusedly.

"Speaking of which - a General Studies student who managed to outdo Military Arts students. You must have some skills in the Arts area, don't you?"

"It's just a hobby. Um....."

Silence from the Student President made Layfon swallow.

"If yours is just the level of a hobbyist, then we ought to increase our admission standards for the Military Arts course."

The news about the fight between Military Arts students at the opening ceremony had spread to new students in other courses. New students arriving at Zuellni came from diverse backgrounds. Besides the

students getting involved in the fight, there were foreigners whom nobody liked. The dangerous atmosphere spreading out from the Military Arts center was influencing students from other courses.

The rioting atmosphere also affected the General Studies area. Students closer to the fight scene bumped and crashed into each other while escaping, igniting the adolescent anger sleeping in male students.

Just when everything was about to get out of hand, a huge noise echoed throughout the hall.

Immediate silence followed, and all eyes turned to the source of that noise.

Where the two students who started the commotion lay immobile on the floor with Layfon standing between them.

"That was just luck. They were blinded by anger and didn't even notice me."

"Yes, yes."

Karian happily nodded at Layfon's excuse. He was smiling with his face, but not his eyes. Again, Layfon felt that the Student President had seen through him.

Honestly, this wasn't a comfortable feeling.

While bearing the pressure that he felt would force him into some dangerous place, Layfon attempted to end this conversation.

"Since I haven't done anything wrong, I'm returning to class."

"You can't!"

Karian prevented Layfon from turning his back to him.

The short denial halted Layfon's footsteps.

"As I said, I've no intention of punishing you, Layfon *Wolfstein* Alseif."

The title in between name and surname caused Layfon to raise his eyebrows.

"......What does that mean?"

"I don't care if you continue to play the fool. Here's a suggestion . Layfon Alseif, how about changing from General Studies to the Military Arts?"

"What?"

"Luckily, there are now two empty slots in Military Arts thanks to those two troublemakers. We have a rule here preventing students from bringing the issues of their home cities into the academy. Those who signed the contract and broke it during the opening ceremony don't have the right to be fighters. The blame for the riot lies on them, so I've already banished them in the form of their 'voluntary withdrawal' from the course."

"No, please wait."

The two students were not important to Layfon.

"I don't plan to change majors."

He clearly conveyed his opinion. To switch to the Military Arts.. ....don't kid with him.

"I came here to study General Studies."

"Military Arts is a study area too. No, no matter what course you're in, General Studies is compulsory till third year. Even if you pick General Studies, you still have to specialize in something after three years, so you aren't learning different things by switching."

"The problem doesn't lie there."

"So what is the problem?"

Faced with that question, he found his breath being caught in his throat.

"......I have no interest in Military Arts."

"I see," Karian gave an exaggerated nod. It was clearly an act. The expression in his eyes hardly changed, just a twisted curve of happiness.

"Besides I'm on a scholarship. I've already applied for a job and studies. I've got to work in my spare time. I won't have enough energy left for Military Arts."

"I see. That's a good argument."

Karian was only agreeing with his mouth. He didn't look persuaded at all.

He took out a document from a drawer.

"Um, Layfon Alseif, D-Rank scholarship, part-time work and studies. Your job is to clean the Central Mechanism Chamber.....I see, this is a taxing and time-consuming job. Do you know that the cleaning takes place while the city rests from after sunset to past midnight? A lot of working students hate cleaning there. It's hard work and the hours are terrible. Do you get it? The pay isn't too bad, but the work is toilsome. Every year, numerous students apply to work somewhere else, or leave the academy for not passing the scholarship assessment. And the scholarship you have is D-Rank. Have you ever considered that you'll be spending all of your pay on school fees?"

"Yes, it's just as you said."

"Frankly, won't it be hard to pass six years like that?"

"I'm confident in my physical strength."

Karian's smile changed. Karian was full of smiles in Layfon's eyes, and something that felt like a favorable feeling towards Layfon came through.

"Ah, perhaps you're right. You should have confidence in your physical strength. That's exactly why I wish you would change to Military Arts."

"What for?"

"Do you know of the Military Arts Competition between Academy cities?"

"......Nope."

Karian spoke without any disappointment in Layfon's lack of knowledge, "To put this simply, the Competition takes place once every two years."

Layfon could guess what Karian was getting at.

"This is a habit of cities. I have no idea what the alchemists were thinking, but cities fight for territory every two years. What's more interesting is that they only compete with the same type of cities.....I could only say that the cities were made too well."

Although the cities were fighting for territories, it was actually the people living in the cities who carried out the fights.

"Sure, it's called the Military Arts Competition, but in reality, the competition is the same as.....the wars that took place between normal cities."

War. Layfon's expression turned grim.

"Of course, our goal is to conduct a student-like all-encompassing fight. The Alliance of Academy Cities supervises every fight. Non-lethal weapons are used. Swords are sheathed.

Anesthetic bullets are used. But since it's a war, there's not much difference between what the winner obtains and what the loser loses. It's not as tragic as a real war, but the ending is the same."

"Is it the city's.....life?"

"Yes," Karian nodded.

Cities have awareness. They're alive. They need food to keep on surviving. Even though they are machines, they need energy to maintain their functions.

The source of a city's life.....is their food, a type of metal called selenium.

"Selenium is a metal born after the earth became polluted, and so it's easy to obtain. To put it simply, you can probably find it by digging at the earth over there. But that's a dangerous action with filth monsters around. Besides, we can only obtain pure selenium from mines with a certain level of energy."

So, the winner took possession of the mine and the loser lost it. While increasing the prosperity of their own piece of land, people were reducing the lifespan of another piece of land.

"When I first entered the Academy, Zuellni had three mines. Now it's down to one," Karian sighed.

Meaning Zuellni had lost in the last two competitions and its Military Arts level was much lower than the neighbouring cities.

"It's doubtful on how much pure selenium we can mine from that remaining mine. I plan to send some alchemists over to investigate the next time our city nears it."

"In other words, if we lose the next time, there's no backup plan ?"

"Exactly. The cities determine the topic of the upcoming Competition. We can't not participate."

'If we lose.....' Just the thought made Layfon shiver.

Even if a city lost all of its mines, its functions wouldn't immediately stop, because it had an emergency reserve of selenium.

But that could only delay the inevitable for a short time.

The city would die. Humans would have lost space to live. Once a city dies, it returns back to the earth. People can't salvage it.

To have a city die of starvation was the same as its people dying of famine.

Thinking of that, a sudden shiver shook Layfon's cold body. The city he had just arrived in would die. He didn't have much of a link with this Academy, but the possibility of the city dying was terrifying.

When a person was young, if he found out that the city he lived in could die, he'd have been scared enough to tremble all over. That experience would be the same for everyone.

Hearing that the fear he felt in his childhood could become reality, Layfon felt like his childhood self, trembling all over.

But, even so.....

"I....."

To fight..... I can't do that.

Yes, let's say that.

With determination, he lifted his gaze, preparing to refuse the Student President watching him from the desk.

But, the words wouldn't come.

The Student President watched Layfon.

The smile on Loss' face had disappeared. The emotionless expression appeared to be too calm. This contrasted with his icy gaze that was pinning Layfon.

To the breathless Layfon, Karian spoke, "I'm graduating this year. As long as this remains an academy city, no one can stay here after graduating. This means once I graduate, I'm not linked to this

place anymore. But I really like the academy. Don't you think it's sad to lose your favorite thing even though you can never set foot on this piece of earth?

It's natural to want to protect what is precious. For one who goes mad over love, don't you feel that it's their fate to reach their goal using whatever means possible?"

A light smile appeared on the countenance of the Student President. Just that. It was his way of joking in a solemn situation.

"Your scholarship will be raised to Rank A. All your fees will be waived. You will only need to earn for your living. If you aren't keen on fashion, you won't need to spend much, so you won't have to force yourself to clean at the Central Mechanism Chamber. Is that all right?"

Rationality told him not to nod. But his instinct howled for him to nod.

And then, Layfon left the room with swaying steps, holding a Military Arts uniform that had somehow been placed into his hands.

A few minutes after weakly closing his door, there came impatient knocking on his door.

"Come in."

It was a girl in Military Arts uniform. A girl with short, golden hair. A girl with determination and resolution.

"Sorry for intruding."

A pair of sharp eyes rested beneath neat and thick eyebrows. Those eyes watched the Student President with challenge. The sound of the harness clasped around her waist accompanied her every step. What was inside the harness was not a sword, but two rod-like things. The threads on the harness indicated she was a third year student.

The girl stood straight before the desk and her gaze met the Student President's.

"I'm a third-year in Military Arts, Nina Antalk. I heard you're looking for me?"

"Yes, I'm looking for you."

Karian smiled.

"What is it about?"

"Have you found enough members?"

The sudden question caused Nina to furrow, but she checked her attitude and replied, "Not yet."

"Yes, I thought so too. You haven't yet sent me the report on your team members since the day you took the application form. The opening ceremony ended. If you don't hurry up and produce your team member list, you won't be able to participate in the next City competition. In that case, you'll become the lowest-level soldier in the next round of platoon competitions."

"Excuse me, Student President. Hasn't the opening ceremony been delayed?"

"It's been cancelled thanks to other schedules. It's a shame. I won't call everyone to the hall again. Because of this year's Military Arts competition, there are lots of things to do."

Nina's face fell. She kept silent.

"I think it's enough to observe the new students at the opening ceremony. What do you think?"

"No one is suitable. Everyone was affected too much by the atmosphere. You can't tell what'd happen in a battle. I want someone who can observe calmly without getting caught in the confusion."

Nina had been watching the entire commotion today. Every new Military Arts student was affected by the two who started the whole thing. Violent expressions on their faces said they wanted to join in and make the mess even bigger.

To get caught up by the enemies like that was the same as digging their own graves.

"Is there really no one suitable?"

Nina didn't reply immediately. Her confused gaze moved up and down.

"No....."

In her hesitation floated up the image of the new student. The one who suppressed the two troublemakers without anyone knowing. He suppressed the center of the commotion to prevent the violent emotions from spreading, and at the same time, he exaggerated his act to threaten people who were caught up in the commotion. She found his response very certain.

But.....

"He's in General Studies."

That new student wore the uniform of General Studies. This way, he couldn't participate in the competition.

But the Student President smiled happily.

"Yes, that was true, until now."

".....What does that mean?"

"He's just transferred into Military Arts."

A disapproving expression appeared on Nina's face.

"I can't waste such good material."

"So you ignored his wish?"

"I didn't ignore it. I showed him the highest level of sincerity. He should be quite satisfied with it."

"Really?"

Nina understood how hard the Student President's attitude could be. Last time during the Student President election, Karian wasn't nominated, yet at the time when he gloriously became a candidate, he had waged a rare intelligence fight with his opponents, causing them to all lose.

"It doesn't matter what the truth is. What do you think now that he's in Military Arts? That's the only answer I want to know."

"What is it to be? At this rate, you won't have enough members. Do you plan to experience the same shame as before, but now as a low-ranked soldier?"

Nina clenched her teeth together.

"I have no such intention."

"Then what should you do? I think the answer is clear."

Karian slid a document on the desk to Nina. It was a resume with the name "Layfon Alseif" written on it. The document was

clearly in the structure of a resume, along with a close-up photo of Layfon.

"Please excuse me."

Having taken a glimpse of the document, Nina turned her back to Karian and left the room. He smiled at the back of the girl who didn't give him a reply.

Alone once more, Karian took out a new document and laid it beside Layfon's resume. It was also a resume, but with the name Nina Antalk on it.

"If things go well, this will become the strongest team. The problem is how to operate it....." he murmured. He didn't look cheerful at all.

On the way back to his classroom, Layfon changed into the new uniform in a health clinic he found. The Student President threatened him that if he continued to walk about not in uniform, he'd be considered to be committing a fraud.

Holding the uniform of General Studies, he entered the classroom to collect his bag. From a uniform he hadn't gotten used

to yet to another unfamiliar uniform..... He wasn't yet familiar with this uniform, but it gave him an intriguing feeling.

Also, the new uniform fit him perfectly.

"Damn, this must have been planned!"

Walking in the corridor, Layfon couldn't help but curse out loud . His height and weight were standard for a male of his age, but his right arm was slightly longer than his left. His General Studies uniform had been fixed to cater for that difference, but how could the Military Arts uniform given to him on a spur of the moment decision be such a perfect fit?

Meaning – the truth couldn't be changed.

"Why.....How did they find out?"

Anxiety filled him. He came here to major in General Studies, to seek a world that had nothing to do with Military Arts, but on the first day of his arrival, he had once again stepped into that world he wanted to leave behind.

"Ah Ah! Why didn't I refuse him? I'm such a coward.....a coward!" Layfon shouted.

Only the opening ceremony was taking place today, so nobody was in the corridor. Without considering, he shouted again, "How should I have put it? That Student President's too scary! What kind of gaze was that? It really terrifies me. How could I have resisted that type of person?"

Having let it all out, Layfon arrived at his classroom. Ah, meaning his classroom would be different now. But the Student President didn't mention that at all? What should he do? Layfon opened the door.

The door opened and the scene inside the room entered Layfon's sight.

"Ah!"

That sound came through.

There were still students in the classroom.

"Look, look. He really is in Military Arts. Yeah~~ It's my win. I'm lucky --!"

One of the girls jumped up in excitement. Chestnut colored hair tied into two tails on each side of her head shook with her movement.

Only three girls were in the room.

Their curious gazes were glued closely to Layfon without reserve. Layfon halted his steps.

"Why! Wasn't he wearing a General Studies uniform? That was deceptive," said a red-haired girl. She wore the same uniform as Layfon's. And like Layfon, the empty harness swayed around her waist.

"I don't have a General Studies uniform. Hey, just why do you have one?" she questioned him as if she was bringing him to account.

"Uh, something happened....."

"So? Do you mean I don't get that uniform 'cause I'm not cute? Is that it?"

Even if you ask me that, I can't do anything about it. As for the girl, she was more handsome than cute. Compared to the General Studies uniform designed for cuteness, Layfon thought the sharp edges of the Military Arts uniform suited her better.

But the girl was dissatisfied.

"Wait a moment, Nakki, calm down. You're causing trouble for Mei-chi," the girl with two tails concluded. The red-haired girl paused as if she had thought of something, then she moved aside for the other girl.

"That's right. Hurry up, Meishen."

With one hand on the back of the third girl, the red-haired girl moved her to stand in front of Layfon.

The third girl had long hair streaming past her shoulders. She looked shy and gentle. Her face facing the ground, she seemed afraid. Her eyebrows curved as if she was about to cry. Her face was faintly red.

"Uh, thank.....thank you very much." Just saying that seemed to take all of her energy. The black-haired girl hid behind the red-haired girl, her face reddened.

"Sorry, she's always been this shy. Even so, she still wants to thank you for saving her at the opening ceremony, right?" said the girl with two tails.

The black-haired girl buried her face into the back of the red-haired girl.

Layfon had no recollection of that ever happening. He only recalled pushing away those people about to get caught in the fight. He might have saved her during that time.

The red-haired girl sighed. "This child.....yes, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Naruki Gelni in the Military Arts."

"I'm Mifi Rotten. The one playing hide-and-seek is Meishen Trinden. We're both in General Studies. The three of us came from the Transit City Joeldem. Do you know of it?"

"Yes, it's the center where roaming buses gather. I passed through on the way here. I'm Layfon Alseif, from the Lance Shelled City, Grendan."

"Oh, that was where Military Arts was born. No wonder you're so strong."

"No, that's not it....." Layfon replied vaguely. Just when he thought of how to explain it.....

"Ah, don't just stand there and talk! I'm hungry. Let's find something good to eat."

"Again? Do you have to make a map of this area too?"

"Of course! Maps for food, fashion, territory.....so long as it can be drawn, I'll do it. Since I'll be here for six years, I don't want to lose out by not having a map. Ah! It's my hobby to gather intelligence. If you want to know something, just ask me. Even if I don't know, I'll investigate it and find out."

"Yeah, I'm hungry.....besides, I have things to ask you, like about the thing you're holding."

With a pair of sharp eyes, Naruki looked at the General Studies uniform that Layfon was holding.

He didn't even get a chance to speak. They decided it for him then.

"Uh, well.....look. This is troubling for Meishen. And you said she's shy."

".....I'm ok with it," Meishen said from behind Naruki's back.

"Ok. That's decided."

And it was decided.

The location was then changed to a coffee shop close by. The coffee shop was made of red bricks and designed not to stand out too much. Since it was already past lunch time, the shop was nearly empty. The four of them somehow managed to catch up to lunch time special. While eating, Layfon explained why he was transferred to the Military Arts – he didn't mention that he was forced to transfer.

They were eating dessert.

Only Layfon wasn't eating, instead drinking juice.

"Oh, I was worried that Academy City only had healthy food for students. It's great that my worry was unfounded," Mifi said with satisfaction, her mouth filled with cake.

"This really is worth drawing a map for."

"And I was wondering what a city operated by students was like. Who'd have thought it would be quite organized," Naruki said with admiration.

In reality, many shops lined the roads heading from the dormitories to the school, but because it was an Academy City, most of the shops were closed during class hours. Once classes finished, the shops were full of people. These shops were managed by senior General Studies students who studied Commerce or Management. Other students came here to work as employees.

The food was made by seniors in Gastronomy.

"There's a Police Department and a Court here too. I'll try applying to the Police."

"Nakki's dream is to be a policewoman."

"Yes."

"As for me, the newspaper. Since it's related to publishing, I'll try to find somewhere that publishes news. What about Mei-chi?"

"......Somewhere that makes dessert."

"Then you'll have to find somewhere with delicious food. Uh, eating while you walk.....watch out so you don't get fat."

"You're pretty red right now, aren't you?"

"Urg, what was that? It's because Nakki's all sweaty from exercising. You smell~~"

"Psh, that's the smell of youth."

"Agh, I don't get you."

The conversation expanded, and Layfon watched it all with a distant feeling. Those three were from the same city. From their conversation, it seemed they already knew each other before coming here. Shut outside the intimate conversation, Layfon sipped his juice.

Mifi suddenly directed a question at him. "That's right. Where'll you be working, Layton?"

"......Layton?"

Startled at the unexpected name change, Layfon opened his lips with juice still inside his mouth. He almost spilled it all.

"Yeah, Layton. That's easier to say, isn't it?" Mifi said cheerfully.

"Nakki, Mei-chi, Layton, and I'm Mi-chan. Is that ok?"

"You didn't give the names any good thought. More importantly, let my nickname be my normal name."

"It's boring to think up a nickname for yourself. If I said "Just call me Mi-chi~", doesn't that sound revolting?"

"Revolting. At least I wouldn't want to be friends with that person."

"Exactly. Then that's ok. So Layfon is called Layton now!"

"That can't be helped. Then we're counting on you from now on, Layton."

"Yeah, Layton, Layton~"

"......Layton."

Even Meishen was calling him by that name. For some reason, Layfon felt like he had come from a really far away place. Where was this place? Just in which dimension was he lost in?

Till now, none of his female friends had ever called him like that. Even his closest friend Leerin would only call him by his first name. For his nickname, she just called him "Lay."

Layton.....Layfon was dumbfounded.

"So, where will you be working at, Layton?"

He could only answer the question, since he knew it wasn't possible to resolve the name issue.

At this moment, no words came to him.

Speaking of which, somebody just said Layfon's scholarship had been upgraded, so it didn't matter if he worked or not.

"Don't tell me it's all right if you don't work?"

"No, I've still got to work," Layfon shook his head. "I'll be working in the mechanical department."

All three girls burst out with "Wow" and frowned.

"Why such a hard working job?"

"I heard you need lots of strength for Military Arts. That kind of lifestyle will damage your body. Are you sure about this?"

"......Won't that be very tiring?"

All three girls expressed their worries. Layfon could only smile bitterly.

Even he knew it'd be hard work. But it was dangerous to rely fully on the Student President. If something happened and he had to oppose the Student President, his scholarship might be cancelled. It'd be the worst case scenario to be left without money, unable to continue his studies.

"Yeah, but that can't be helped. I'm an orphan. I don't have anything else besides the scholarship."

He thought the way he put it was natural and inconspicuous.

But the word "orphan" caused the three girls to widen their eyes . Embarrassed, their uneasy gazes darted around.

"Ah~~ I see. Sorry. Do your best."

"Yeah, if it's anything I can do, I'll help out."

"......Me too."

"It's ok. Don't worry about it....."

Their attitude made him feel troubled.

"I don't find it particularly difficult. I feel troubled when I'm pitied."

Even so, Mifi and Meishen exchanged a glance, their faces full of anxiety. From his previous experiences, Layfon knew it wasn't possible to make them understand it right away, so he wasn't bothered by their reaction.

"Ok, I get it. I won't worry about it." Naruki nodded immediately. Her quick response was a surprise to him.

"Uh? What? Did you say you wouldn't worry too much about it ?"

"Yeah, that's right."

It was clear that Naruki wasn't just talking about it. She meant it . Layfon nodded hesitantly, then he couldn't hold it back anymore and laughed.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just that you act like a big sister."

"What did you say?"

Naruki frowned, but Mifi agreed.

"Ah, I understand. I understand. Nakki's got that feel about her. She's cool."

"......And she's popular with lots of girls."

"Yep, she always receives lots of presents and love letters."

"Well, I'm troubled by that. I've never known what to do with them."

Although she said so seriously, Layfon laughed again.

(The atmosphere feels good.) Layfon thought as he laughed. Although what he experienced at the opening ceremony was a setback for him, from his conversation with the girls, it felt as if he was now back on track.

"Uh.....excuse me."

A voice broke through the laughter.

As their eyes found the owner of the voice, everyone couldn't help but held their breath.

Standing beside the table was a girl. The silvery hair hanging down to her waist shone as if to reflect the light of the coffee shop. She had snowy white skin and a heart-shaped lower jaw. Peeking from inside her collar was a delicately small neck and a kind of a dangerous charm. Long eyebrows trembled above a slightly lowered, silver-eyed gaze.

A girl who was as beautiful and delicate as a doll.

No one noticed she was wearing the uniform of Military Arts.

The first to finally notice was Naruki.

"Aren't you a grade older than us? Do you want something?" Naruki said.

Layfon realized the color of the threads on her harness was different from his own. From the harness hung a long thin rod like thing.

"Are you Layfon Alseif?"

Silvery eyes caught Layfon's image.

"Yes."

"I've something to tell you. Could you come with me?"

"......Okay."

Layfon stood up naturally, compelled by that voice to obey.

The girl turned her back to leave the coffee shop. Layfon would have followed behind just like that, but he returned to the seat. He took his bag and from his wallet, left some change on the table for his juice.

"Sorry, I gotta go."

"Sure. Then go." Naruki said on behalf of her two still silent companions.

"Yeah. But, just what....."

Wordlessly, Layfon rushed after the silvery girl.

The bell tied to the coffee shop door swung out crisp notes as Layfon passed. Thinking back on how confused Layfon appeared to be, Naruki smiled bitterly.

"Wh.....What just happened?" Mifi muttered.

"Of course he's been targeted after that elegant performance at the opening ceremony."

Mifi didn't understand what Naruki had just said. She looked at her friend with questions on her face.

"Isn't there a different badge on that Senpai's chest pocket?"

"Yeah, really?" Mifi frowned.

"......It's a silvery round thing?"

"Yes."

Meishen had seen it.

"......There's the number 17 on it."

"A badge that only people belonging to a platoon would have."

"A platoon.....what is that?"

"To put it simply, they're the official candidates in the Military Arts course. It carries the additional meaning of a fighter with high level of skill."

"Um.....yes?"

Naruki explained. "They're the core teams in the Military Arts competition. Underneath the General headquarter are the platoons .....They're called commanding teams. Beneath them are the larger teams, and those take charge of people who don't belong to any teams, meaning, normal Military Arts students like me....."

"Wow, if that's the case, then it's like climbing all the way up to the top." Mifi said, clapping her hands.

"But it's not that easy in there."

"Why?"

"Didn't I mention it? That badge holds the meaning of a high level fighter. Students belonging to a platoon must excel in a certain area, from commanding ability to the control of Psychokinesis. Mostly, they specialize in a certain weapon. Besides the individual skills that are judged, the strength of how well an entire team does is also assessed. Whether a person can work in a team is also evaluated. As such, there's competition going on between teams for the ranking list. In other words, it's a fight in between students at the academy. During those fights, if a team doesn't perform well, the worst situation is that it gets disbanded. Official candidates turning back to normal students. Fighters normally have strong self-esteem. If one returns to being a normal student, other people would say he's fallen from the clouds to the bottom of a valley.....no one can take that kind of a setback. His life in the Academy would become too painful to bear."

Naruki glanced at the door that Layfon had just left through. No new customers had entered. The bell remained solemn.

".....Layton said he's going to clean in the mechanical department," Meishen said.

"Ah, that will be tiring for him!" Mifi said. "Will he be all right?"

"Yeah, it should be quite smooth for him." Naruki could only give such an answer. She washed down the last piece of cake with red tea.

What Naruki said to the other two at the coffee shop also came to Layfon's ears, but from the terrifying girl with golden hair.

The beautiful, silver-haired girl took Layfon deep inside the first year dormitories, it was a certain building with an old and worn out feel about it.

Layfon was taken to one of the rooms and was greeted by a terrifying girl with golden hair.

"I'm Nina Antalk, the captain of the seventeenth platoon," the girl said firmly.

The room Layfon was in had been split into two by a huge wall, so the space was only twice as large as a normal classroom. On the wall were hung many different types of weapons.

Including Layfon, there were five people in the room.

The first person was the girl Nina Antalk, standing right before Layfon. Next was the girl who took Layfon here. The beautiful silver-haired girl had moved immediately to a corner after having entered the room.

The rest were two male students. The taller boy lay lazily in a corner. The other wore a dark green working suit that was stained with engine oil and some other type of machine related liquid.

Nina gave the confused Layfon an explanation about the platoon.

Layfon half listened, with his mind somewhere else.

"Do you understand?"

"Ah, yes."

Turning his gaze back to Nina, Layfon gave her a quick answer without really meaning anything he had just said.

"Then why was I called here?"

Layfon understood everyone here was an official candidate.

But, that was all he knew.

Nina didn't explain why Layfon was here.

Half of Nina's eyebrow trembled as if it had the cramps.

"I understand from your explanation that everyone here is an elite. But, if that's the case.....because of that, I don't get why I, as a first year student, was called here," Layfon said, trying to mediate

the atmosphere. Nina closed her open mouth, her shoulders moved as if she was breathing deeply, then she opened her mouth again to speak.

But before that—

"Buahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

The tall male student burst out laughing from his position.

"Sharnid-senpai!" Nina said loudly, her shoulders trembling in anger.

"Gahaha! Ha~heehee.....Ah, my stomach hurts! Nina, it's your fault. All because you beat around the bush and gave the new student there an opportunity to pretend he was a fool."

"Um!"

Nina clamped hard on her teeth.

"Heh!" Sharnid jumped up, watching Layfon in a flippant manner.

"I'm Sharnid Elipton, a fourth year. I'm a sniper."

"Ah, nice to meet you."

"Well, let me explain clearly in place of our captain. Layfon Alseif, we asked you to come because we need the right number."

"Huh?"

"Hey, hey, hey. Stop pretending. Everybody saw your performance at the opening ceremony. The excuse of you being a new student and not having enough skill won't work. You've already proven your skill. We thought you were good, so we want you in our team."

Sharnid gave Nina a meaningful glance.

Nina cleared her throat and stood before Layfon again.

"Layfon Alseif. I order you to become a member of team seventeen. No refusal will be accepted. The Student President has already given permission and formally proposed for your application. Either way, those who are in the Military Arts aren't allowed such a feeble action as refusing to enter a platoon."

What a resolute speech. Nina's unyielding attitude meant Layfon had no way to run.

"We'll now conduct a test to see which position you're best suited for in the platoon."

Nina took out the two rods from her weapon harness. She pointed at Layfon with the rod held tightly in her right hand.

"Choose whatever weapon you like!"

Perturbed by the seriousness in Nina's eyes, Layfon turned to examine the weapons on the wall.

The price of free school fees.....what an A grade scholarship.

Chapter 2: Life as a student

How are you? I'm quite good here.

How's life at the new school? Have you made friends? I'm experiencing new things everyday. As long as there are new people around me, the levels of experiences are different and very surprising.

I hold a curious and refreshing view of my new life. Everything's so new and different that sometimes I think back to the past. Recently, I remembered what it was like when I first started my training.

Perhaps it's too early to call that the past, but I can't change the things that have already happened. Maybe it's better to call them the past.

I've begun a new life here. Things didn't go well at first, but I think they'll become better.

I've made new friends here. A senior senpai really looks after me.

How're you over there? I shouldn't have to worry because it's you. You must have made more friends than me, since you're better at interacting with people.

Oh yes, I'm now working while studying. I am a janitor in the Central Mechanism Chamber. It's tiring, but it's surprisingly interesting. This was my first time seeing the real form of the city. I never thought it was like that. Perhaps Grendan's real form is like that too? Maybe Grendan's. .....It's quite fun to imagine what it's like.

Reading up to here, you must be throwing a tantrum. But I'm not telling. Are you angry? If you want to know, wait till we meet again.

May we meet somewhere other than Grendan.

To my dear Leerin Marfes.

Layfon Alseif

Layfon chose a sword from the assorted weapons hanging on the wall. It was a sword with a long, wide blade.

"I can't change the setting as it's a practice sword. Is that ok?" the boy in the working suit said.

Layfon nodded.

"But I feel that a sword doesn't suit your body build."

To the dissatisfaction uttered by the other boy, Layfon felt the grip of the sword and didn't pay much attention to what was said.

"Harley, that guy said it's ok. You're such a nag."

Sharnid stopped Harley with a flippant tone. Even so, Layfon could still hear Harley mumbling.

Layfon swung the sword with one hand, his body moving slightly, pulled by the point of the sword. He moved back and forth in the platoon's training room.

"Have you had enough warm up?" Nina asked as Layfon stopped his movements.

Layfon nodded wordlessly.

"Right, then....."

"Restoration," Nina whispered. The two rods in her hands transformed, becoming bigger and reflecting the light of the ceiling as if their black surface was absorbing the light of the room. The handles changed to fit Nina's hands. A number of ring-like things had expanded along the part of the weapon used for attack. Nina's wrists lowered naturally.

It looked totally different from what it was before.

It was a weapon called Iron Whips.

The changes to the weapon came from the combination of the voice and the memories of the Dite. The alloy used in alchemy could restore even the original weight of the item.

"I won't hold back."

Nina flicked the iron whip in her right hand and the sound of air being torn apart rang out in the room. She pointed the whip at Layfon's forehead.

Feeling the non-existent pain on his forehead, Layfon nodded wordlessly.

He readied his fighting stance.

And what happened next was fast as lightning.

Nina rushed over, giving Layfon no time to calculate the distance between them.

She attacked with her right iron whip. Layfon turned aside to avoid the attack aimed at his chest, but Nina's left iron whip was already pounding down towards his exposed back. He raised his sword-arm and turned his wrist, placing the blade against his back to counter Nina's whip. His wrist could have dislocated in between receiving the pressure of the attack and recovering, after having spent all the strength on countering the whip. Not with Layfon. He guided the heavy pressure down the wavering blade, relaxing his grip on the handle and letting the flat side of the blade hit his own back. At the same time, he used that momentum to turn around and escape through the opening between the two whips.

Layfon opened up the distance between him and Nina, and resumed his fighting stance.

He heard a short whistle.

"Haha! This is my first time seeing someone stop Nina's first move," Sharnid said.

To Layfon, Nina didn't care about Sharnid's comment. Her sharp gaze, so like that of a beast pinning its prey, never moved away from Layfon's body.

This time, Nina cautiously weighed their distance. Layfon's stance changed in response to Nina's, who was slowly changing her position.

The hard build of the iron whip made it clear that it was an offensive weapon. For the sake of convenience, its length wasn't too long. One didn't have to worry about an iron whip being damaged in battle, unlike a sword. An iron whip could be swung at will and would not break. It could also receive a direct attack. Grendan's police force used the iron whip as a standard weapon because of its convenience. However, normal police were only equipped with light iron whips. Layfon's sword-arm was slightly numb. After receiving the attack, he could tell that this pair of iron whips was as heavy as it looked.

She could use the iron whips however she liked. Her strength and her familiarity with her weapons made Layfon speechless.

The two of them circled each other.

Tension built up in the room. The air felt thick, and on Layfon's forehead were beads of sweat.

Again, Nina was the one to close the gap. She rushed over as Layfon's foot left the floor, moving in reaction to her. Layfon tried to avoid the sudden and straightforward attack by pulling back and opening more distance between them, but she kept closing in. He had no choice but to use his sword. He dipped the sword point low to bring it up in an attack, but it was knocked aside by Nina's whip. In seconds, he flicked his wrist to adjust the track of his sword.

Layfon's attack changed from low to high, chopping down towards Nina. She blocked it with her right iron whip and counterattacked from the left with her other iron whip. Layfon quickly stepped to her right and once again, pulled open the distance between them.

He wanted to keep fighting with more distance, but Nina seemed unsatisfied.

"Can you use external-type burst Kei?"

Her unexpected question made Layfon lose the rhythm of the plan he already had in mind.

"Can you use external-type burst Kei?" she repeated. He nodded .

Nina smiled. "Good."

She crossed the iron whips before her chest.

A huge noise and vibration that could have toppled a giant ran through the floor.

"Take this!"

When he had collected himself, Nina's happy and cruel smile was right before him.

In the next moment, Layfon had fainted.

Layfon lifted his sword. He slashed out with the blade without any sense of confusion, and his heart was calm and unruffled. He slashed out without any sense of confusion, but what about the thing that had been slashed?

There was no questioning it.

Of course it was a problem.

So long as one lived, one would encounter all sorts of problems. How to solve a problem? In the end, "living" was in itself the cause of all problems.

When one problem was solved, the next would surface.

The end was never in sight. One continued to remove one's problems, only to have more closing in.

The light filtering down from the ceiling bounded off the blade of the white alloy Dite.

"Do you desire the Heaven's Blade? You can have it."

Layfon mumbled the words in the arena that was so quiet that even a fallen needle could be heard. The blade fell from his hand. The irritating metallic sound of it hitting the ground echoed in the arena and the lonely blade lay on the floor.

The problem that's been cut away now lay beside the blade.

Layfon uttered an "Ah" at the scene. It wasn't a sound of surprise and joy, but just a simple response at reality.

Numerous hands appeared to point at Layfon. The people surrounding him were faceless and formless. They were only there to repudiate him.

This is unprecedented! Traitor! What a shameful guy!

All kinds of denouncements were turned into those fingers pointing at Layfon.

Layfon didn't care. He looked at them coldly.

So what?

Could they solve the problem like that?

Did they want to write the wrong answer in the space reserved for the answer to the question?

He was only striding forward on the path to the right answer. Who'd know that the Heaven's Blade would fall onto the ground because of that.

His gaze put fear into the people pointing at him. Subconsciously, he looked at the solution which had rolled close to his feet.

Beside the fallen blade was a body.

A body that looked like Nina.

No, it was Nina. The tracks of Layfon's sword were clearly carved into her body. She lay on the floor, shocked and speechless.

"Is this the answer?" somebody asked.

"It's a dream."

One single phrase solved it all.

The first feeling he had after waking up was extreme self-hatred.

"Wuaah, that's impossible!"

His body curled up, Layfon held his head.

The metal frame of the bed squeaked. A cabinet filled with medicine leaned against the modest, white wall. He smelled faint disinfectant and realised he was in the clinic. He wasn't surprised about it. In the second when he was about to faint, he knew Nina's attack would make him lose consciousness.

Compared to this, that dream was even more serious.

"I actually dreamt of revenge. That's not possible. I'm so disgusting...So disgusting!"

He rolled back and forth on the bed and finally fell off it. He moaned as his side hit the floor.

He lay on the cold floor and moaned, all the while murmuring " so disgusting" and allowing the temperature of the floor to cool down the heat in his face.

"What're you doing?"

"......I'm just shocked for being so useless."

Layfon stopped moaning at the sound above him, but he didn't get up.

Wait a bit more.....He couldn't stand up before his reddened face had completely cooled down.

"If it's all right, I want you to stand up."

The voice was from the girl who came to the coffee shop and took him to the platoon.

"If it's all right, give me more time."

"Why?"

"Please say yes."

"Must I?"

"Yes."

The girl seemed to understand more from his repeated request. Layfon didn't know what she had understood, but she didn't persist in questioning him, and she didn't force him to stand up. He could feel the tip of her toes beside his head, staying there, immobile.

The two of them fell silent.

Silent.

Silent.

Silent.

Losing to the silence in the room, Layfon said, "I still don't know your name. Can you tell me your name?"

"Oh, yes. I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Felli Loss, second year in Military Arts."

(Loss?)

Nasty memories surfaced in his mind.

"Hello. Uh, I'm sorry if I got that wrong....."

"You're not wrong. Karian Loss is my older brother," Felli cut him off to confirm his unease. Layfon felt weak.

"Is that so....."

"Yes. Do you hate my brother?"

She got ahead of him again.

"Isn't it about time to get up?"

Layfon picked himself up slowly from the floor. As expected from a clinic. The environment was clean and tidy, even rolling on the floor didn't dirty his uniform.

Layfon observed the girl's appearance and found her eyes a bit like Karian's. They had a beautiful look about them. They must be related.

A light sigh from Felli, then her rigid expression relaxed.

"It really is better to see the face of the person I'm talking to."

"Uh.....Sorry?"

"Not really. I didn't come at a good time."

It wasn't easy to forget that she'd seen him rolling and moaning on the floor. His face reddened again.

"Do you hate my brother for forcing you to transfer into Military Arts?"

Felli returned back to the previous topic, indifferent to Layfon's current expression.

"..... I think it's a bit too extreme to describe it as 'hate'."

He couldn't find any other word to say.

"I hate my brother," Felli said while Layfon was hesitating.

"What?"

He couldn't understand what she meant by that.

(She hates.....her own brother?)

From Felli's pale lips came the words, "I didn't want to study Military Arts, but he forced me into it."

"Why....."

"For victory," Felli concluded without hesitating.

"He'd do all he could to reach his goal, no matter the means. Our wills mean nothing to him."

"No, but....."

Felli watched Layfon while judging her own brother. No sadness and anger could be detected from her neutral expression. Even the smile she had before was gone.

So Layfon couldn't sense any sort of reflections from her in her previous words.

He was confounded.

"He'd perform any foul acts in order to win. It's ridiculous that we have to work for such a person."

"Then what do you want me to do?" Layfon asked in confusion.

For a delicate senpai with a short stature, her doll-like perfect face contained no traces of perplexity. Once again, she concluded, " You only need to remain as you are."

"What?"

"Remain as you are with that attitude you had when you fought Nina."

"What do you mean....."

Felli had already turned her back and opened her schoolbag on the long bench.

She took out something from it and left it on the chair.

"Uh, excuse me....."

"This is your badge and the permit to be armed. Please pin the badge on your uniform. Tomorrow, go with Harley to the Weapon Fitting Department and take the permit with you. Harley'll help with your weapon settings."

Having quickly told him that, Felli nodded lightly and left the clinic.

He had lost his conversation partner. Layfon's words rolled in his mouth. His outstretched hand had lost its purpose, and could only wave weakly in the air.

What came through first was a sense of debilitation, then a long sigh.

Felli complained heavily about Karian, but she left immediately after leaving Layfon with the instructions she was told to deliver, whereas Karian had dismissed him from the room. Felli's manner was exactly the same as her brother's.

"Just what now?"

Layfon bent down on the long bench. He couldn't think of any good strategies. Beside him were the silver badge and a piece of paper.

It seemed that the reality of his entering the platoon won't be changed.

"Ah—gee.....Why did it turn out like this!?" Layfon sighed.

The next day after school.

Just when Layfon was about to escape, not knowing where Harley's classroom lay, Harley himself appeared in the same oil-stained working suit that he wore yesterday.

"After watching the fight yesterday, I don't feel that the sword fits you. Nina holds heavy weapons that don't suit her either, but she knows how to handle the weight and has been fighting through in her own way," he said to Layfon, who was following behind him with a fed-up expression in his eyes.

Harley never once noticed it.

He continued with enthusiasm. "But your situation is different. Your body movements with the sword just weren't smooth. Your fighting style is more focused on speed, right? That's how you were trained, isn't it?"

"No. I only learned a little at the Dojo. I don't know the details that well. The weapon I used was about the same as yesterday's practice sword."

"Really?" Harley said, looking confused.

"You don't look like an amateur from the fight with Nina yesterday. I thought you've gone through professional training."

"Not really. In Grendan.....I was born in Grendan. Dojos of that level are everywhere. I went to train a bit because there was a dojo near my home."

"Military Arts is really popular in Grendan. Well, I see. So that means in Grendan, there're lots of highly skilled fighters like you?"

"Well, how should I put it? I haven't fought much with others, so I'm not sure."

"Whatever it is, you must still have some confidence in your real strength?"

"Not at all."

A smile appeared on the kind and friendly senpai. They came to a building with a sign "Weapon Fitting Department" on the wall, and entered it.

Harley handed the document through the window, took a wooden box from the window and carried it back to the waiting Layfon.

"Come to my research lab."

Harley thrust the box to him and led the way out of the department.

"Uh, to put it correctly, it's my class's lab."

Students of Alchemy were assigned to groups and each group had its own research lab. In there, they could perform personal experiments.

"You can get your own research lab if you regularly take the top place or you publish some pretty good thesis. In here, I can't really do what I want to do."

"What is senpai specializing in?"

"Weapon adjustment. Sure, I need to invent, but I prefer to adjust weapons so they best fit their owners."

Layfon now understood why Harley was so stubborn and determined about his weapon being unsuitable.

"That's a bit different from trainers. How should I put it?"

"In Grendan, we call them the Dite engineers."

"Ah, I see. That's a good title."

The research lab was messy.

No, the lab itself was the manifestation of messiness.

After opening the door, Layfon saw something in the colour of charcoal sticking tightly to the floor. Near the wall beside the door was a pile of magazines and papers with difficult names. A thin layer of dust covered it. There was also a mug with a dirtied edge and a piece of half eaten bread thrown aside.

The life of a single male.....and its worst stereotype had become reality here. The provoking smell in the air made Layfon dizzy.

Harley looked to be practical, but that seemed to be only limited to what he was interested in.

Three tables sat in the spacious room. On each desk was the exact same situation, so Layfon couldn't tell the difference between them. Harley pushed aside the things on one of the tables and got him to place the wooden box there.

In the box were several rod-like things. In a relaxed manner, Harley took out one of the rods that was dark as charcoal. He took out a long electrical terminal from the gear box on the table and inserted it into the rod. The terminal slid in easily.

"Let's first adjust the handle of the sword. You're one-handed, right? Do you want to set it for two hands?"

"Please do."

Layfon said so, knowing that Harley wouldn't have listened if he said he could adjust whatever settings he wanted.

"Roger. Hold this."

Harley handed something over that he took out from the small mountain on the desk. It was a half-transparent item with a bluish tinge to it. At one end was a wire linking it to a machine.

"Hold it just like how you hold a sword."

Layfon thought of the feeling he had when holding a sword, then he tightened his grip on the icy cold rod-like thing. The thing had its own resistance and didn't get squashed. Compared with its soft appearance, it was surprisingly hard.

"Wow, your grip is quite strong. Even if you fight with your bare fists, it's gonna hurt."

Harley nodded while looking at the number appearing on the display. He pulled out the keyboard to enter the number.

Sudden changes appeared at the end of the rod where the terminal was inserted. The rod extended and expanded, its appearance adjusting continuously, eventually becoming what was shown on the display.

"Try again."

Layfon did so.

"How does it feel?"

"......Pretty good."

Nothing felt out of place. Layfon's every finger held the handle closely.

"I'll do more adjustments once the entire weight's been decided. Well, then the handle's ok now. Next is the material. How do you want it? What Nina uses is black Dite. It's got good density but with decreasing conductive rate. If we're talking about speed, it's better to use white or green Dite. I'd recommend the white. If you don't get it, I've got a sample here. Wanna give it a go?"

Without waiting for a reply, Harley had entered the experimental lab and brought back a pile of rods.

Layfon's worked up a cold sweat just by looking at the pile of rods on the floor.

"Well, let's begin testing."

Smiling, Harley handed a rod to Layfon.

It seemed he'd spend a lot of time here.

When Harley let him go, the sun had already sunk down in the west.

Layfon returned to the dormitory in a flurry and jumped onto the bed. He slept for a few hours and was awakened by the alarm clock. He fixed his messy hair, dressed himself in his work clothes and rushed out of the dormitory.

This was Layfon's first work day.

Holding the map in one hand, Layfon arrived at an underground entrance outside the residential district. He handed his work permit to the police student for check up and entered the interior. Right before him was a lift. Layfon sat inside the simple lift that was encircled with a metal fence, and headed down into the depths of the city.

Just when the indescribable smell of oil and liquid became stronger and stronger, the lift stopped, sending a great jolt up Layfon's body.

The dim light lit up a scene before him. Numerous tubes and wires crossed each other. A gear wheel was moving up and down in its own rhythm. Selenium flowed like blood in one direction inside the glass-like tubes, whereas liquid in the colour of murky sediment flowed in the opposite direction.

This place was underneath the city – the Central Mechanism Chamber. The scene of a Regios' heart lay open before Layfon.

"How shocking....."

A young man who looked to be also a half-studying and half-working student walked past and greeted Layfon as he stared

speechlessly at the sight before him. Layfon followed the young man to the person in charge, and then started his job of cleaning.

As he was a beginner, he was sent to clean the corridors.

Grouped with the other newbie, Layfon went to work in the maze-like corridors. About one hour later, both of them started to get the hang of how to remove the mixed liquid from the wall, so they divided the work between them. It was easier this way to finish their target.

When Layfon went to discharge the dirty water in his bucket and get some more clean water, his partner was resting on the floor, totally exhausted.

"Are you resting?"

"Yeah," came the powerless reply.

"How to put it...it's tough. I picked this job coz I needed money, but I never thought it was such hard work to just clean the floor!"

"That's because you used too much unnecessary strength. What if you don't use the muscles of your wrist but the weight of your entire body? That'd save some strength," Layfon advised, but his partner was so exhausted that he only made some noise as a response.

Never mind, Layfon thought. He continued cleaning with the clean water and the cleaning liquid.

He didn't resent the repetitiveness of the work, since he could leave his mind blank and not think of anything. He only needed to concentrate on moving his body, his consciousness swallowed in the flow inside him. That was the blood running in his veins, which was the flow needed to open up the flow of Kei. If he focused more, blood and Kei would flow to the antibodies inside him.

Layfon kept on brushing while enjoying that feeling.

When the water in the bucket turned dark, he was brought back to reality.

"I have to change the water," he murmured, and unexpectedly got a reply.

"Then please change mine too."

Startled, Layfon lifted his gaze to the source of the voice.

And got another shock.

"In exchange, let me treat you to supper...Uh, what's wrong?"

"Senpai, why are you here?"

It was Nina. She wore the same work clothes as Layfon. A bucket filled with dirty water sat beside her feet, and she was holding a brush missing a handle. Oil stained her nose, cheeks and even her hair.

"I'm half studying and half working too. Is that so strange? With that, I'm leaving the water to you. I'll buy some food. Meet up here later."

Nina left Layfon at a loss.

When Layfon came back with clean water after a few minutes, Nina also managed to make it back in time.

"Thanks."

It didn't seem like he was dreaming. Nina was looking at the wide-mouthed Layfon disapprovingly. Both of his hands were occupied with the buckets.

"How do you plan to eat? Put down the buckets. You should rest when it's time to rest."

"Ah, yes!"

He placed the buckets on the floor and hurried away to join her. They sat down on a tube.

Nina handed over a sandwich.

He took a large bite. The delicious taste of chicken, vegetables and spicy sauce seeped into his tired body.

"Very delicious."

"This is the most popular bento. It's always sold out. If you don't time it right, you'll never get to have it."

Nina's lips relaxed slowly. She handed Layfon a paper cup filled with red tea.

It was red tea with ice. The sugar level wasn't too high. The drink tasted nice.

"Did you buy this too?"

"No, I made it," she shook her head and put the lid on her water bottle.

"I wasn't planning to share. Didn't know you were here, so I went to get some water just then."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

"No worries, and just a warning. Prepare your own drink from now on, the water here tastes horrible."

Layfon left his mouth open, then looked at the side of Nina's face. A Nina happily eating her sandwich while her beautiful golden locks were oil-stained just didn't match each other.

"What is it? I can't eat with you staring."

"Sorry. I'm just surprised."

"Yeah?"

"Very surprised. Like how I can't imagine senpai's working here , and also....."

She looked very cute, taking huge bites of her sandwich, but knowing he'd get quite a beating if he let those words out, Layfon quickly swallowed them.

"Well, in terms of health, this is the worst environment you can imagine."

Luckily she didn't notice him struggling with his words.

"But it's true that the pay is good. For someone as poor as me, I'm grateful to get such high pay."

Poor?

"Are you that surprised?"

"Ah, no, not really....."

It was true that he was surprised about it.

When he first met Nina, he felt an elegant higher-class bearing from her on top of the disciplined demeanor that passionate Military Arts people preferred.

"Frankly, my family isn't poor."

Nina washed down her last bite of sandwich with red tea. Looking at the Nina now, it was hard to imagine she was of the upper class.

"Then....."

"Didn't I say my family? My parents were against me studying here, so I ran away from home. They don't send me any allowance. "

"And for what?"

"Why did you come here?"

"The only scholarship qualification that I passed was this academy city's, so I'm here."

Disappointment appeared on Nina. No, what she tried to cover underneath was the anger in her eyes.

"And I'm an orphan, so I haven't got any money."

After quickly adding that line, he could see the apology in her eyes.

"..... Is that so. I'm sorry."

"No, that's ok."

Layfon found her funny. Although she always appeared stubborn and calm, when he talked with her at such a close distance, her expressions were like the images of a kaleidoscope. In particular, it was funny of her trying to cover her own expression and still act cool.

"I've always wanted to go outside," Nina said softly and took another sandwich. "For us born in a Regios, the majority of people spend their entire lifetime in the same city. Because of the filth

monsters outside, we're trapped like birds in a cage..... but, there are also people who travel on roaming buses in between cities. They can look at many different worlds, as opposed to many who only see one world. I'm envious of them."

Receiving Nina's glare again for staring at her, Layfon hastily took a bite of his sandwich.

"I couldn't become a traveler, but I still wanted to see the outside world, so I was determined to come to the Academy City. I found that a reasonable choice, but my parents were very against it ."

Nina's eyes narrowed in enjoyment. Perhaps she was recalling the scene of her defying her parents.

"That was my first time arguing with my dad to such an extreme end. I didn't know what he was thinking, but I was happy ."

"Is that why you don't get any allowance?"

"Yeah. They found out that I took the exam behind their backs. They locked me in the room when I was about to leave. I only managed to escape and board the bus in the last minute. I sent home a letter after arriving here. I wrote what I thought was right. The return letter was extremely short. It included a return bus ticket and a piece of paper saying "Besides this, we won't give you any help.""

"So I'm like this now," she concluded and fell silent, eating her sandwich. Layfon also focused on eating.

Nina finished the last sandwich and poured some red tea into the paper cup.

"I'm only good at Military Arts, so that's why I'm in this case. But you seem different."

According to the Student President, Layfon was forced to transfer.

"Not at all," he shook his head, lowered his head to gaze at the red tea in his cup. The coldness of the iced red tea seeped through the paper and into his palm.

"I still haven't decided what to do, but, I want to do something."

"Um, what about Military Arts? Frankly, I think you're strong in it."

"Not Military Arts. I failed it already."

"Failed? What happened?"

Nina was the type to say what was hard to talk about. Layfon shook his head bitterly.

Just when he was searching for words to confuse the topic.....

Gla, Gla, Gla. Footsteps of someone running in the corridor sounded, then that someone appeared, coming close to the place where Layfon and Nina were resting.

It was an older man wearing the same clothes as them. A beard adorned his chin. Machine oil filled his fingernails. Layfon guessed he must be a senpai in the Mechanical Engineering course.

"Hey, did you see it here?"

"See what?" Layfon said but Nina got ahead of him.

"Here again?"

"Again. Sorry! I'm counting on you!" the man ran away.

"This is troublesome."

Nina drained her red tea and stood up.

"What happened?"

"Come and help. We don't have to clean today."

"What?"

Nina smiled. "The consciousness of the city has escaped."

Even so, he didn't understand it. He could only say "what?"

This time, Nina laughed. "Never mind that, just come."

Layfon followed.

Amongst the regular noises of gears turning were erratic footsteps stamping on metallic floors, but Nina was strolling in the busy atmosphere.

"Is this urgent?"

"For the Mechanical Engineering students that look after this place, it's serious enough for them to have their marks taken off."

"Oh....."

The city's consciousness?

She said that the city's consciousness had escaped, but what was the city's consciousness? Layfon didn't get it.

Since it was a self-governing city, the city would move according to its own will. No one knew where a city would go, and the people living in it couldn't control it. People lived in cities that floated, lost on the barren surface of the earth. Rumour had it that in the time when humans didn't have to rely on Regios, they had maps mapping the entire world. But these maps had lost their value. No one ever read them anymore.

For humans living in this age, what happened outside a city was a mystery. At the same time, the city that they couldn't control was also in itself a mystery.

He wouldn't have not known what it meant by the city's consciousness.

But what it was like to have the city's consciousness escaping was hard to fathom.

Nina didn't hesitate when coming across any forked corridors. Layfon watched her back, confused.

"Aren't we looking for it?"

"There's no need."

"Why?"

Layfon was more confused. He caught up with Nina to look at her face, and only saw excitement on her gentle countenance. She didn't look around. She was just walking straight in the direction she knew.

"The city's consciousness has a strong sense of curiosity," Nina said suddenly. "So it likes to run around. That serves to avoid the filth monsters, but what's more important is its bottomless curiosity to explore the world. It runs here and there..... that's how Harley puts it."

Nina halted her steps, blocked by the railing. From here, they could look into the depth of the city's heart, layered by machineries, the air vibrating with the sound of machines at work.

And above that was something.

Something that pulsated with golden light.

"And because of that, it's also curious about new things inside itself. It's curious like you, a new student."

"Zuellni!" Nina called. The ball of light flew through the air in circles.

"The workers are agitated," she said.

The ball of light flew straight at Nina. Without giving Layfon the chance to shout "watch out", the ball of light was in Nina's arms.

"Haha, aren't you full of spirit?" Nina smiled, carrying the ball of light.

Layfon took a closer look at it and was speechless.

The ball of light was a small child.

"But you gotta work properly. If you get lazy, the workers have to run around and adjust a great deal of things."

It was about the size of an infant, but the ratio of its limbs looked normal. Her hair was long enough to touch her toes. She gazed at Nina cheerfully with big and animated eyes.

(This.....is the city's consciousness?)

Layfon stared at the light-emitting girl without a word.

The girl looked past Nina's shoulder and caught his eyes.

"Ah, he's new. Let me introduce. He's Layfon, Layfon Alseif. He's very strong. Layfon, she's Zuellni."

Layfon's gaze flickered between Nina and the girl.

"That is.....uh, the same as the city's name....."

"Isn't that a given? The city is this child's real form."

Perhaps this was a given, but it was hard to associate this little girl with the huge city he was in.

"Oh, I'm Layfon Alseif. Nice to meet you," Layfon extended his hand to shake hers.

Zuellni had already jumped from Nina's arm to her shoulder, then onto Layfon's chest.

Layfon held her in haste. She was weightless, but he could feel her body heat through his thick working suit.

Zuellni held tightly to his clothes, hugging him. She was gazing up at him with pure and polished eyes, making him feel a bit embarrassed.

"Oh, she seems to like you," Nina said, trying to suppress her laughter.

"What?"

"Zuellni won't let anyone she hates touch her. If I explain it in Harley's words, Zuellni is the Electronic Fairy, the consolidated form of the city's particles. Once the form loosens, the electronic particles will shoot through the other's body, just like a lightning strike."

Hearing that explanation, Layfon wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't believe such a cute little girl would harm humans.

"The workers are all so worked up about Zuellni being missing because of that too, on top of the gears not moving properly; but I don't think this gentle girl can harm others."

Nina patted Zuellni's head. Zuellni squinted.

But even Layfon himself didn't know how he'd have reacted when he first learned of this. Nina's easy and relaxed manner enabled him to hug Zuellni so naturally.

"Senpai is incredible."

"Why so sudden?"

"That's what I think."

"You're weird!"

Nina took Zuellni from him.

While she turned her back to Layfon, he saw her cheeks reddening. Was she too sensitive?

Nina talked to Zuellni as she walked back to the corridor.

"Ok, have you seen enough? Then return to your place. Even you dislike the workers adjusting things when nothing's out of place."

Layfon ran to catch up with her.

"We have to train tomorrow for the platoon match. Don't bring your exhaustion with you," Nina said to him.

Layfon halted his footsteps, his jaunty mood disappearing.

Chapter 3: Training

I've finally settled down. How are you over there? It's irritating how cities can only maintain contact through letters. It'd be great if we could just call, but how do you fix a line between cities? If that could be done, the cities would probably trip on the cables.

Honestly, I'm tired. I'm used to cleaning at the Mechanical Department, but it's still problematic. I suppose I'll get used to these irregular hours sooner or later. Right now, all I can do is keep at it.

School life is all right. But I haven't had much chance to use my brain, so I'm not expecting much for my results.

I regret not listening to you and doing some serious studying. You must be laughing now. Ok, this is reality, so I can only accept your laughter. I really regret it.

From the day I let go of the Heavens Blade, I've turned back into someone normal. Except, it's difficult to make a fresh start. Sometimes I think that my past lifestyle was relaxing. A voice inside me hopes to return to the old life.

It's embarrassing. Master won't let it. Her Majesty won't allow it. Even I don't agree with it. Letting go of the Art of Katana was my way of showing my attitude to Master and Her Majesty.

To be forgiven by letting go of the Katana was my biggest.... Uh, what am I saying? Sorry, please just forget it all.

That's just an excuse. Everything is. I'm really useless.

I won't send this letter. It isn't worth reading.

"Are you ok?" Mifi asked.

It was now lunch break. Layfon bent over the table. He didn't even have the strength to go buy bread.

Mifi drained the pre-packaged milk and without moving a foot, tossed the packet into the rubbish bin. The packet flew through the air and fell into the bin as if it was sucked into it.

"..... Mifi-chan, you're dirty," Meishen protested.

The milk left inside the packet had leaked from the straw. Mifi ignored Meishen, who had her handkerchief pressed to the side of her head. Meishen was also looking at Layfon.

"..... Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Even Layfon himself wasn't sure. What he just said wasn't convincing at all. He saw bags under his eyes in the mirror yesterday, so he was feeling a bit down.

"Talking about yourself with that expression. You're so unconvincing."

Naruki returned to the classroom. She held two paper bags and placed one before Layfon.

"Here. I just picked whatever since I didn't know what you like. "

"Ah, sorry. Thanks."

"No worries. Remember to pay me back though."

Naruki smiled as she took back the money from him. She then looked at his waist and saw a Dite hanging from the harness.

"So what's the reason? Work at the Mechanical Department or is it 'that'?"

"Uh, work's ok. It's surprisingly good."

Layfon got up slowly and took a bite of the bread from the bag. The dryness of the bread was uncomfortable. He inserted the straw into the packet of milk that was in the same bag.

"So it's training? Was it hard?"

Mifi took out another packet of milk from her paper bag and inserted a straw into it.

The three girls sat down in the chairs around him. He smiled bitterly and sucked milk from the straw to wet the inside of his mouth.

"It's training for the upcoming platoon match, right? That must be exhausting," Naruki nodded.

"......Platoon match?"

"Ah, I know. I heard about it before, but I've forgotten, so I'm not really sure," Mifi raised the same question as Meishen. Naruki started her explanation.

As for Layfon--

(Naruki speaks like a senpai. Do all female soldiers speak like that?)

Thinking of this, Layfon didn't take in anything being said around him.

"I've talked about the platoon matches before. They're to determine the ranks of platoons. The higher your rank is, the more important a position you'll get in the Military Arts Competition."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Of course. That means your abilities are acknowledged. Besides, you can really do something for the people in the city. It's something for Military Arts people to take pride in."

The way she put it felt like it had nothing to do with what she was talking about.

"But isn't that dangerous? If it was me, I wouldn't have chosen to come to such a dangerous place."

"That's coz you're thinking of it from the angle of Military Arts. For example, if you get to run a magazine, you'll also do what you can to get good results, right?"

"Oh, I see."

"If it's Meishen, you'll also do your best in your cake shop, right ?"

"......Yeah."

They both understood now.

"To get good marks in your specialized area isn't just about dignity, but also about the evaluation of strength. In strategic planning, you've got to really know your own strengths. Like whose ability is the best, which platoon excels, those kinds of things. So the best way to get a better understanding of all that is to create real war-like situations, meaning, the platoon matches."

"So it's to determine who is the strongest? That sounds like a little kids' fight."

Layfon couldn't help but agree with Mifi. Who is the strongest? Thinking how he got himself involved in this meaningless ranking fight, he couldn't swallow his bread.

"The matches aren't conducted in the manner of knockout matches. The purpose isn't to see who wins the most matches, so you can't really tell which team is the strongest. Still, we can't deny that some people really care about the matches. The match is time limited, and with that, you can judge the strength and precision of the teams. If a platoon wins, it'll get prize money, just like how you get scholarship if you regularly take top place in the General Studies' test.

"A topic not related to me has appeared."

Mifi puffed up her face, and the two other girls smiled. Layfon also laughed.

"..... Is training hard?" Meishen asked cautiously with anxiety in her eyes.

"Yeah, um~~"

They'd know even if he denied it, but it looked pretty bad to admit so honestly, so he could only substitute with some vague wordings. Men really are proud creatures. This saddened him. He could only smile bitterly.

"Aa, Layton isn't training coz he likes it, so you don't have to force yourself to train so hard! It's best to just pretend, since training is tiring," Mifi concluded, after finishing her third packet of milk. Meishen also nodded. Only Naruki was silently nibbling at her bread and eyeing Layfon suspiciously.

He didn't train because he liked it.

That was the truth. He didn't like Military Arts anymore. No, seriously, he had never liked Military Arts. It was something he had already lost.

It was the same as how one couldn't repeat his past and regain what was lost.

Wolfstein. Layfon's title that the Student President used, was also one of the things he had lost. It was not possible to get it back.

The Student President was seeking that which could not be taken back.

And, the Nina who knew nothing of it.

"......That's right."

Layfon returned his attention to the room.

"Oh, yes."

"Huh?" from Mifi. In her hand was a fourth packet of milk.

"Do you just drink milk for lunch?"

Mifi angrily conveyed her need to overcome the disadvantage of her body. She gave him quite a thrashing.

Nina's impatient gaze stabbed his face.

Even so, he couldn't help it. In the battleground reserved for Military Arts students, Layfon held the restored Dite in his hands, a feeling of directionless uncertainty rising inside him.

Harley had adjusted a sword of green Dite for him. The long, thin blade emitted a teal light. For he who was hiding in the bushes, the gem-like light of the blade made him stand out too much.

He leaned against the trunk of a tree and controlled his breathing. His heartbeat had to be regular, or else the training machine would detect the irregularity and attack him.

The irritation of a plan gone wrong was scolding Layfon. Though he didn't feel that he was responsible in any way, he was the only one here. Both Felli and Harley were waiting for orders in the rear.

Since meeting the Electronic Fairy Zuellni at the Mechanical Department, Layfon had not seen a smile on Nina's face.

Sharnid was the first reason behind her irritation. He was late for training. He totally ignored her harsh reproach and didn't even reflect on his actions. All he did was utter a casual "sorry" with dissatisfaction and Restore his weapon.

Sharnid's weapon was a sniper rifle. On top of the light and white Dite was a large scope. It'd be impossible to avoid the automatic machine's attack without Sharnid's support.

Layfon still felt uneasy.

He had no idea what Sharnid's range was. The breathing irregularity could be because of that. He relaxed his breath.

Next was the unease that came from his uncertainty of the enemy's location.

The last team member, Felli, was responsible for intelligence support. The doll-like, silver-haired, beautiful girl used a half-transparent staff that was made of heavy alloy. The staff was made up of things that looked like flakes which were scattered when the staff was in operation.

Felli had the power of Psychokinesis. She could move things with her mind. Through Psychokinesis, she could scatter the flakes over large areas to obtain intelligence and convey the information to her team members.

"Two responses at point 1005."

Felli's light and faint voice sounded through Layfon's earpiece. This was also an item using Felli's Psychokinesis, so it was harder for enemies to eavesdrop.

Without exchanging glances, Layfon and Nina rushed out of the bushes. An arm smashed suddenly into the place where the two had been hiding, then a robot shaped like a barrel with a wooden knife fitted onto its wrist was spraying red paint everywhere.

"Too slow!" Nina called as she retreated. After collecting herself, she lashed out at the machine with her iron whips, and Layfon headed for the other automatic machine that was still hidden from sight. He moved out of the shadow of the trees to make himself a target so Nina could concentrate on her fight.

As if to answer his prediction, the other robot was about to swing down its weapon. The fake wooden axe chopped down towards Layfon's head. He took a step back and felt the passing of air at the tip of his nose.

Unexpectedly, he got himself into a fight with another machine. The enemy type was a distance-fighting type. Layfon "uh"-ed at that fact and dipped his head to avoid the axe.

Distracted by another long-range attack from somewhere, and observing Nina suppressing her opponent, Layfon was unable to make an attack.

Noticing his situation, she called angrily into her transmitter, " Still haven't found it yet, sniper?" While calling, she knocked off

the colored wooden knife and struck the machine with her other iron whip.

Now that Nina had won, Layfon didn't know what to do next. Should he lead the enemy to her and fight it together, knowing he couldn't block the fire from the other enemy? No, Nina would become the target of the enemy, and besides, he didn't have the confidence to work with her. In addition, once the captain was defeated, they'd lose the match, so he must take care not to involve her in more danger.....Confusion caused Layfon's movement to slow down. He did avoid the axe, but the way he did it looked so ridiculous that even he was angry about it.

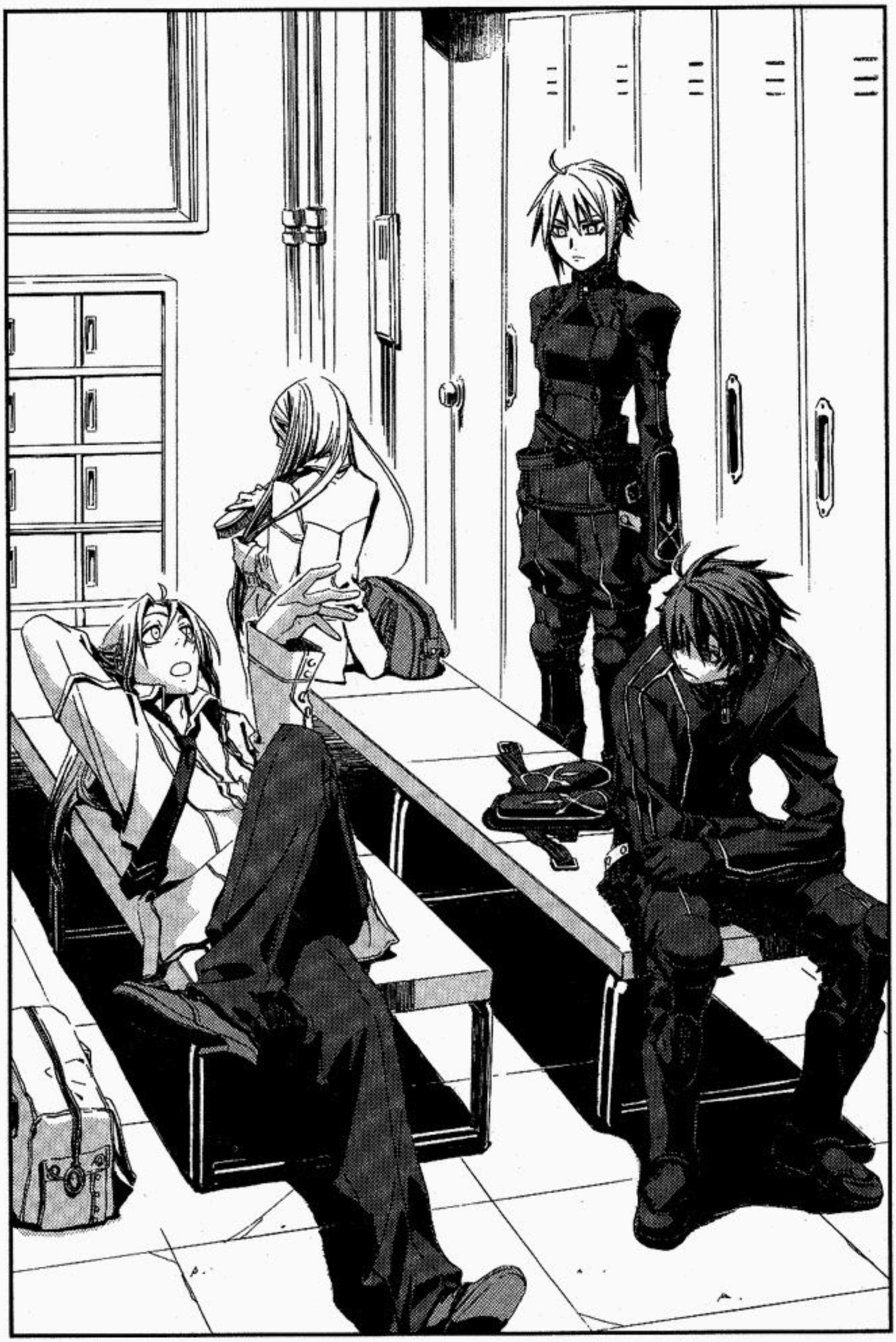
He'd lost his balance.

At that moment, Nina headed straight for him. Perhaps she thought he couldn't avoid the next strike. He felt the same.

And this was when the long-distance shot came.

The bell signaling the end of the match rang through the air.

Spattered with mud and paint, Nina walked in front, looking displeased. Everyone was tired. The scene had now moved to the Resting Room. With both wrists on his knees, Layfon sat tiredly on a chair, looking at the floor. Sharnid laid down on a bench, his eyes covered by a towel. Felli was the only one with a calm expression. She had let down her hair and was combing it.



Nina stood before them all, watching them. Anger came through.

"We just formed the platoon a short while ago, so I understand we can't yet coordinate well. I clearly understand that," Nina sighed, and relaxed her shoulders.

Then she asked each person:

"Sharnid, why didn't you cover Layfon?"

"It's not that easy to avoid shooting your own teammate. It's not possible with the kind of coordination we're aiming for, if we can't even breathe on the same beat! To do that, Layfon has to accurately sense the timing of my shot and move accordingly. Shooting a comrade who's in an intense fight with the enemy scares me," Sharnid waved his hand.

"Really?" She looked at Layfon.

"Layfon, why didn't you lead the enemy to me?"

"If the captain fell then we'd have lost. I could act as bait and draw out the enemy."

"You should have let me make that decision."

"Yes, but there wasn't time."

Another enemy was attacking him at close range, so he didn't have the leisure to wait for her order.

"Felli, your searching speed was too slow. Couldn't you be faster?"

"That was my limit."

Felli's reply was unusually cold. Her refusal to respond was like a whip across Nina's face. Would she howl out in anger? That thought tensed Layfon's shoulders, but Nina remained silent, glaring at Felli.

Who knew how long this silence would last? Embarrassment and disapproval were thick in the air. Though he felt suffocated, he didn't feel like breaking that atmosphere.

He was already exhausted.

But.....

"Excuse me....."

Harley walked in without knocking. He immediately noticed the atmosphere and halted his steps.

"What's up?" Nina glared at him.

"Ah.....ahah, I came to help Layfon with his setting of the Dite," he replied, scratching his head. Perhaps speaking up helped him to make up his mind. Harley carried his box to a chair and opened it.

"Since he's used it for a few days, I think I can get some detailed settings done. If anyone else feels your weapon needs adjusting, you can let me know."

"No~~ nothing!" Sharnid sat up slowly.

"Harley's settings are perfect. That I can be so relaxed is all thanks to you."

"Mine's ok," Felli shook her head.

"Really? That's great. Nina?"

"No. If there's a need, I'll let you know."

"Sure."

What happened next was just the sound of gears being laid out on the floor. In this very short period of time, everyone was watching Harley's movement. He definitely felt their weird gazes, but Harley started to whistle happily.

The atmosphere became more relaxed.

No, perhaps they were only tired of the embarrassment.

"Well....."

Sharnid picked up his bag.

"Where are you going?"

"The training's finished, right? Even if we're going to have a meeting, there's not much to talk about. I'll go back after a shower. Got a date afterwards."

"What!"

"Then I'm also leaving," Felli said, quietly taking her bag.

"Aaaah, Felli's not gonna wash away your sweat?"

"I don't sweat as much.....Besides, showering here makes me feel like someone's peeking at me."

"Haha, what a shame. If Felli doesn't grow up more, no one will peek at you."

Ignoring Sharnid's teasing, Felli left the room. He shrugged and headed for the shower room.

With his head on his hands, Layfon watched Nina standing there. He had nothing to say to her. Her shoulders were trembling. Even so, he couldn't escape as Harley had already caught him.

But he felt he couldn't stay silent anymore. Focusing on the gears, Harley seemed oblivious to his surroundings. Nina's face showed she didn't know how to end this awkwardness.

"Um....." Layfon made some noise without knowing what to say .

"We have to practice a formation. You come over when you're done."

Nina walked out. The irritating sound of the door closing affected the air of the room.

".....Looking at that face of hers, it'd be good if she calmed down a bit," Harley said, smiling.

Layfon smiled in return.

"Seriously, Nina can act calmly, but she's impatient now. That can't be helped."

His face full of smiles, Harley wrapped a wire around Layfon's Dite.

"Senpai really understands her."

"Kind of. We're childhood friends."

"Oh.....Huh? But I remember Senpai....."

She said she ran away from home.

"Haha, ran away from home? Do you think she wouldn't know anybody at the place she ran away to?" Harley said cheerfully.

That was true.

"Uh, that's true. Why didn't I think of that?"

But on second thought, he knew the reason. Nina came here against her parent's wishes. Such strong determination gave off a proud and lonely air.

So he felt she didn't know anyone here.

The other reason was that he didn't know anyone here from Grendan.

(Ah, so that's why. Her situation's different from mine.)

After laughing secretly at himself, Layfon forgot his misunderstanding of Nina. Besides, the other three girls that he knew also came from the same city. He felt helpless with his slow intuition.

As per Harley's instruction, he restored his Dite. The wire around the Dite conveyed its information to the machine. He asked Harley a question, who was looking at the number on the display.

"Why did senpai want to form a platoon?"

"Do you find it hard to believe?"

"Senpai's only a third year, isn't she? I heard that most of the platoon captains are fourth year or above. Hasn't she still got time? "

"Yeah, if you look at the study years, then there's still time," Harley nodded. "But who knows whether this city still has time."

His fingers flying on the keyboard, Harley asked, "You know right? You should have heard of it from the Student President."

"Yes."

"He said it was to make us more alert of danger, but he did all that to increase our fighting strength."

"Is that it?"

"That's right, but I don't think that's all of it. He's stubborn."

"....."

"Ah, let's leave the Student President aside for now."

Harley clapped his hands, pulling Layfon back into reality. His face had turned green just by remembering the nasty memories about the Student President.

"The time Nina spends here is important to her. You should know since you heard of her running away."

Layfon nodded. Nina had said that she wanted to see what a majority of people couldn't see: the world outside the city.

"That's a precious experience. Yes, it's a precious experience to come to a city run by students only, but it's even more precious an experience to understand the outside world. A lot of people can never experience that."

Even so, there were numerous Academy Cities, enough to conduct the Military Arts Competition – the same type of cities fought for fuel. In other words, this was the proof that the city had enough number of students.

This told Layfon that there were more humans than he thought.

But a majority of people would never see each other. Even Layfon didn't know everyone at Grendan. Grendan had a population of about a hundred thousand people.

But if people lived in the same city and wanted to meet up, they could. Perhaps if they desired to see each other, even with the filth monsters roaming the earth, they could see the person of another city. But he couldn't place the level of difficulty of those two types of meeting side by side.

It's rare to get on a roaming bus just to see another city.

It's extremely taxing to travel to another city, and it's dangerous.

Numerous cities spread across the earth like stars, moving back and forth in an isolated world. Thinking of this, it felt so unbelievably hard to comprehend that it confounded him.

"People might have never met, but we were given the chance to meet here. Don't you find that interesting?"

"....."

"Nina doesn't want to lose that experience, so she'd try everything within her power. Nina's the type of person to act."

"So please don't hate her too much," Harley added.

Layfon didn't think he hated her.

Afterward, he headed alone for the training complex – in the direction of where he thought the training room was. It didn't take him long to arrive as it was close to the battleground.

Layfon felt a heavy weight on his shoulders as he neared the entrance of the training complex. He wasn't sure whether there was a weight. No, he knew he had a burden there. He just didn't want to realize that it was on him.

If they lost in this Military Arts Competition, the city would lose its fuel source. In other words, the city's consciousness that he came across at the Mechanical Department – that cute Electric Fairy would face its death.

What a tragic thing.

But he couldn't really feel that happening. Just like the clear scene reflected in the glassy surface of the door to the training complex, he felt that it was happening in another city. He couldn't comprehend the fact that what he did would have a direct impact on the life and death of the city.

He went through the door and headed for the training room of platoon 17. The sounds of practice from other training rooms made

the entire building tremble. The building was designed to contain the varied powers of the Military Arts students, but it didn't seem to have good soundproofing.

"Isn't it time to give up?"

He heard this just as he was about to open to the door to the training room of platoon 17.

He stopped.

There were other students in the room besides Nina.

Three males surrounded her. The tension in the air caressed Layfon's skin. His wrist moved towards his weapon harness on its own.

Nina's arms were lowered. She held her restored iron whips tightly. She stared at the three students with an icy gaze, hiding her emotions.

The conversation continued. No one seemed to have noticed Layfon.

"You should know now that it's not easy to form a platoon," the person standing right in front of Nina said.

"And your members are..... Sharnid, who can't coordinate well with his ability, and two others that the Student President forced into Military Arts. Morale itself is already a problem. Do you really

think you can form a team with those people and lead them in battle? If that's the case, then you're looking down on Military Arts ."

The target person wasn't him, but Layfon felt pressure bearing down into his stomach. This was an intimidation technique using the Internal type Kei. It was the opposite of External type burst Kei . The Internal type Kei could directly affect one's body.

The voice with Kei made Nina tremble.

"Let me say this for the last time. Join our team, Nina Antalk. The 3rd platoon needs your calm judgement and hard defence. Besides, you only need to be in our team to become strong."

Nina's shoulders were shaking, but her eyes showed she was not afraid and threatened.

She didn't look at the hand stretching towards her. She stared right in the eyes of the young man.

"I thank you for your invitation. Let me thank you deeply for giving me such high evaluation," she said firmly.

"But if I still want to test my ability. No matter how badly I look in others' eyes, I still want to test myself through my own strength. "

Her resolute answer tightened up the atmosphere again. This time it wasn't the person before – probably the captain of the 3rd platoon, but the other two people.

Layfon held his breath.

The captain of the 3rd platoon sighed.

"I knew you'd give me that answer."

He relaxed his shoulders. The other two also lowered their hostility.

"I feel you're wasting your ability..... really, why did the Student President accept your unreasonable team proposal?"

"Sorry."

"There's no need to apologize. It's not a bad thing for the city if you become stronger."

"But, I hope you understand that this city doesn't have the time to watch you grow."

"..... I understand."

"Good."

The captain shrugged, turned from Nina, and walked away. As there was only one exit, Layfon quickly moved aside.

The captain left wordlessly, not even looking at him.

The door closed.

Nina's gaze pierced through Layfon to the closed door. She didn't notice his presence. Layfon was painfully aware that he wasn't in her line of sight.

She wasn't looking at him.

(Ahah, she's looking at the other side.)

It was the side of the glass.

He felt he had lost his place there.

Of course, even he felt it was too rich a line coming from him.

Wolfstein – He should have understood the moment he abandoned this title and left Grendan.

So he could pretend the pain in his chest was someone else's.

Then he could view it as something beautiful.

"Come, Layfon. Time to practice."

Nina's line of vision moved to him. There were no traces of confusion in her expression. No traces left of her conversation with the captain of the 3rd platoon.

"Yes," Layfon nodded and hurried to her side.

But the feeling of standing on the other side of the glass didn't disappear.

He knew this was a feeling of distance.

"I know there are plenty of opportunities for us to fight together , but we can't even talk about that if we don't first coordinate our breathing."

Those firm looking pupils of hers.

The Kei filling her limbs gave off a painful light from her eyes. This had nothing to do with the quality and weight of her Kei, but with her firm and determined personality.

It was beautiful.

To Layfon, it was as beautiful as a painting.

That was why she stood on the other side of the glass.

Layfon restored his Dite.

The sun sank down in the west. The complex closing time came, and saved Layfon from Nina's side. After washing off his sweat, he plodded back to his dormitory.....

"Layton sighted! Capture him!"

"Roger, capturing him now."

Mifi's shrill voice and Naruki's lowered voice vibrated through his exhausted body.

Next.....

"What? Huh?"

When he had collected himself, he was already tied up by a rope. When did that happen? He toppled onto the ground.

"We've caught the target. Please give your next order."

"Parade him around the city."

"Roger."

"Hey, stop it!"

"Huh~~"

Layfon calmly intruded. Mifi puffed up her cheeks.

"Uh, that can't be done. Speaking of which, how come he became like this?"

"That's my rope-capture technique, passed down by my father. Isn't it incredible?" Naruki said.

"Brilliant. It's too brilliant. But why so sudden? I don't understand what's happening!"

"Oh, I'm just doing it. I'm not sure myself."

"Just doing it? And what's with the rope? Do you carry it with you all the time?"

"As someone who wants to join the police force, it's a must to carry around a rope all the time."

"Is that a given?" Layfon asked, but failed to sway Naruki's confidence.

"So what's this for?" he asked, looking at Mifi and Naruki.

"Oh? I said we were going to drink tea, so we waited here for you."

"I see..... but why this?"

"Just doing it."

"Fufufu ~~ I knew Layton doesn't have to work today. Don't underestimate Mifi's intelligence."

"Yeah, but I didn't refuse you. Before I got the chance to refuse, I was like this."

"Ok ok. Stop talking. We've invited a special guest today."

They didn't listen to his words. Mifi pushed a person out from Naruki's shadow.

He thought it was Meishen.

But..... no.

"..... Felli senpai?"

"I got caught," she said without any expression. She was also bound by a rope.

They spaced out like that for a while...

"Hey--!! What were you guys doing!?" Layfon looked around. Luckily, there was no one around but them. He wondered how long those two girls had been hiding here, waiting to ambush them .

"Because ~~ I've wanted to talk with her since I saw her."

"No, I'm saying why did you use this method? It's a bit extreme. Um, it's like kidnapping from the perspective of an observer."

".....She's the younger sister of the Student President."

"Meaning.....We can get a huge ransom, right?" Mifi asked seriously.

"....."

"....."

Layfon and Mifi looked at each other.....

"Police, there's a kidnapper here."

"OK, I'll catch her right away."

In the next moment, Naruki had also tied up Mifi.

"I just wanted to have dinner with everyone!"

After Mifi had surrendered, Naruki untied everyone. The four of them headed for the busier district of the city.

"Mei-chi's got work today, so we're waiting for her to finish, and might as well enter the "observe Mei-chi's working look" plan. "

"A plan?" Layfon said.

Mifi laughed.

"Well, can you imagine her appearance at work?"

".....That's a bit difficult."

It was hard to imagine Meishen working. She was so shy.

"Right? This'll be my first time seeing her at work. I'm really looking forward to it."

Mifi skipped on the red bricked path.

"It's good she's taking the initiative, but I feel a bit lonely now," Naruki said, shrugging her shoulders.

"......Have you three known each other for long?"

"Yeah, we were neighbors."

"Our parents knew each other for a long time too, from their birth."

"Amazing....." Layfon honestly showed his admiration. He also had a group of childhood friends from the orphanage, but none of them came to Zuellni.

"You three must be very close, coming here together."

"Yeah~ It's fate."

"Yeah."

"Yes, we won't feel lonely even if we're in an unfamiliar place. Our parents agree with that," Mifi said, and started a conversation about the past with Naruki. Unable to enter the conversation, Layfon kept a distance between them.

Felli was beside him. Silently walking, she stared at the backs of the two girls.

"......Sorry for forcing you to come with us."

"......It's ok."

She didn't move her gaze away from the backs of the two girls.

"The rope seemed fun."

"......Was it fun?"

"Yes," Felli replied, not even moving her eyebrows. Layfon didn't understand what she was thinking. But it was good that she didn't get mad. He let out a sigh.

Felli was walking lightly with her hands behind her back. Looking at her childish appearance, he couldn't imagine that she was older than him. She was older, but her age difference didn't stand out at all because she was only one year apart. But comparing her with Mifi and Naruki, she looked even younger than them.

"Uh, is senpai working too?"

"No."

"......I see."

He couldn't think of what to say. Even his question was blocked . He knew nothing of her. Unlike Mifi and the others, Felli wasn't the type to divert with a conversation so long as the atmosphere was right.

"......Just keep doing that." Felli said as he was thinking of what to say.

"Huh?"

"I meant during training. Just keep doing that."

"Why?"

"Don't you want to avoid fighting?" The honest and direct question made him speechless.

"If you perform well without the will to fight, other people will have expectations of you."

"......I suppose," he nodded.

"It's ridiculous to do what you don't want to do."

Meaning Felli also hadn't used her true ability in training. The same as him.

He now understood why he was so tired. He couldn't escape the place he wanted to leave. This feeling took a lot of his strength. He made unnecessary moves because of a lack of concentration, which in turn wasted a lot of his strength.

"Why do I feel as if there's no other road to take?"

He didn't want to, but he had to. All he could do to resist this was to not put his all in training.

And because of that, he was tired.

"Even so, I have to resist this way. As long as I'm in the Academy City, I can't escape my brother. Unless he lets me go, I've no other choice."

"..... Do you dislike your own brother?"

He might have asked a meaningless question. She did say she hated him before. But perhaps "dislike" and "hate" were different.

"I dislike him. He doesn't care about me at all."

Layfon had nothing to say. Walking beside her gave him an urge to find something to talk about, but she didn't care about ending a conversation abruptly.

The two girls walking before them had arrived at the shop. They waved back at them.

".....You're so mean."

"Never mind. You look cute."

Mifi was calm in the face of Meishen's reproachful gaze.

They moved from the coffee shop that Meishen worked at into another nearby shop. In here, senior students were permitted to drink alcohol. Dishes of BBQ skewers and vegetables lay before Layfon and his friends.

Naruki nodded in a serious manner as she put the bamboo sticks back into the bamboo container:

"Yeah, you're cute. Are you making fun of me because I can't wear it?"

"......Of course not."

"Yeah, I know."

Meishen's cheeks puffed up at Naruki's flippant tone.

When Layfon and the three girls entered the coffee shop earlier, Meishen had stood still on her spot, her face turning green. And whether it was fortunate or not, there were no other female waitresses before break time other than Meishen. Layfon felt bad for her. She was shaking like a small animal while receiving the order, but Mifi teased her happily.

"But Mei-chi really is cute, isn't she, Layton?"

"Um?"

He thought back of her look in the coffee shop.

The modest and deep blue uniform in itself wasn't cute at all, but the Meishen hiding her face behind the tray was cute.

He gave his honest opinion, and Meishen lowered her head, her cheeks red as of boiled water.

"Yeah, yeah, Layton. Well done, you unfaithful~~"

"Why?"

"It's a high level skill to praise the person in question along with the uniform."

"......Mi-chan, Nakki, I'll get mad."

The three girls argued in their own styles. Layfon sighed and turned his gaze to Felli.

She was silently eating a skewer of BBQ chicken.

She didn't seem to want to talk. She put the stick back into the bamboo container and examined the dish, thinking of what to eat next like a mathematician tackling a challenging question.

(Here's another small animal.)

Frankly, her sober eating expression was also cute.

Layfon nibbled at one end of the batter-fried vegetable stems as he listened to the conversation of the three girls.

"Aah, let's stop teasing Mei-chi. The cake over there was delicious."

"......Right?"

"It wasn't too sweet. I get why Mei-chi loves that shop. Well, how's it going? Are they teaching you things?"

"......Not sure. Seems they'll teach me later. Really, I've always wanted to just stay in the kitchen."

"Since you showed them your cute look, of course they'd send you out to serve customers."

"......Mi-chan!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um, according to my investigation, no matter which shop it is, it'll prioritize students getting into the kitchen if they've had real cooking experience."

"That's insurance. It guarantees the students must have some level of skill."

"But it takes at least half a year to get marks."

"......Wuwu, half a year."

"Can Mei-chi tolerate half a year as a waitress?"

"......No problem. I'll steal the recipe."

"Hahaha, what an audacious declaration."

".....Never mind me. What about you two?"

"Me~~? I've already decided."

"A magazine?"

"Yeah, though it's mostly doing errands. Nakki?"

"I'm going to join the City Police force. There're lots of Military Arts candidates, so I can't let my guard down."

"Oh, if you join the police force, then can you get an armed permit earlier?"

"Yes, but you can only carry a baton."

"Fufufu.....But aren't you happy? You're really jealous of Layton's sword~~,"

"Not at all. I just want it because a baton is the pride of a policeman."

"You really are!"

Layfon was listening to the three. Even here he felt he was very distant from them. Nothing could help him.

Because he stood on the other side of the glass.

He could hear the sound, but he couldn't step inside it. He squinted at the three, unable to enter that cheerful territory.

There was no chance to speak.

The party ended as the closing hour of dormitories neared.

Student dormitories were spread out across the city. After separating from Naruki and the others since their dormitories lay in a different direction, Layfon found himself heading in the same direction as Felli.

".....Is senpai going in this direction too?"

"Yes, what a coincidence."

Layfon nodded. It was that much of a surprise to him.

"Senpai didn't enter the conversation back then. I'm sorry for being insensitive."

In the end, he himself passed through that time without speaking. He couldn't speak up as a special atmosphere encircled the conversation that only familiarity would allow.

Felli shook her head at the apologizing Layfon. "Not at all. I was happy."

"Really? That's good."

It was hard to conclude whether she was truly happy as her face showed no emotion at all.

They alone walked on the path lit by street lights. Layfon felt awkward about it. The sound of footsteps that was usually small and insignificant drifted into their ears.

"I don't talk, not because I'm not satisfied," Felli said suddenly.

"Ah, really?"

"I didn't know what to say because I haven't had any friends before," Felli said as she walked past a street light. Layfon glanced at her but couldn't make out her expression.

Just then, sparks fell from her silvery hair to scatter the dim light. He widened his eyes.

"Senpai!"

"Oh, sorry. I lost control for a little bit."

She pressed down on her long hair with her hand. Green phosphorescence gathered in her hair, emitting a dull light. Unresponsive and without any heat. Only the tiniest bit of vibration in the air that Layfon could feel with his left wrist.

This was Psychokinesis. It was the external type burst Kei and the internal type Kei, but at the same time, it was different from both. It was an inborn ability, a type of Kei flowing in the body that training would never obtain.

He watched her closely. Even her eyebrows and eyelashes emitted phosphorescence.

Hair was the best conductor for the Kei of Psychokinesis. There were people who conveyed their Kei to whips made by hair.

(She lost control of it?)

That was shocking. Just that and her hair could emit the light of Psychokinesis to the tips of each strand of hair. This meant her ability of Psychokinesis was inconceivably powerful.

"Senpai....."

"......This is the reason that my brother transferred me into Military Arts," she said.

"My ability of Psychokinesis goes way beyond the normal standard."

"I think so too."

Layfon had also seen Psychokinesis phenomenon of glowing hair, but it was only one part of the hair. He had never seen a case like Felli's, whose whole hair shone without her being aware of it.

"Because of this, I've received training in Psychokinesis since I was very small. Everyone in my family strongly believed I'd become a Psychokinesist. Even I never doubted it."

"But....." she added. Layfon could feel her shaky emotions.

He was right. The trembling on her lips was different from that of normal conversation.

"I thought that everyone's future was predestined. I thought that they all knew what they'd become in the future. But this was wrong. Of course, it's not possible for a criminal to know he can only become a criminal."

He didn't laugh at her words. She only said it without much of an emotion. Perhaps this was meant as a joke. Since he wasn't sure, Layfon decided not to laugh.

"Once I realized that, I tried to think of what I'd be doing if I wasn't a Psychokinesist. No one knows their future, but mine was determined from when I was very young. I became intolerant of that, and eventually left my home city to come here."

Her parents took a huge step back for her and allowed her to study at her brother's Academy City – Zuellni.

"My parents thought it wouldn't matter much if I didn't get to train in Psychokinesis for six years. I also thought I could find the other me, the me who wouldn't become a Psychokinesist."

But she was unable to do that.

Because of Zuellni's present situation and the person who tried to solve the crisis – her brother.

"I hate my brother. I hate my brother who forced me on the path of Psychokinesis," she murmured.

Layfon listened to her silently. He couldn't hear any emotions in her light tone, but he felt she felt confined, as if a certain being was under pressure and was crying out sorrowfully.

"And I hate myself for only becoming a Psychokinesist."

Because of her exceptional ability, she couldn't escape her destiny.

"Those kinds of people are too radiant," she murmured.

Layfon could only nod in agreement.

Because he felt the same.

Chapter 4: Platoon match

It's been a while since I wrote my last letter. A lot's happened over here, so I'm a bit tired. It's because of the cleaning duties in the Central Mechanism Chamber and school life.

I still haven't received your letter. I wonder whether my letter arrived safely?

I'm finding it very difficult to look for my future goal.

In Grendan, I was fortunate to have ability and it didn't take me long to choose the path of the Katana. But now I feel that I need huge courage to determine my own future.

Every time I look at these people who strive forward for their goals, I think they have lots of courage, yet I feel stupid and ridiculous for thinking that. I know there's no need to admire them. It's enough to look at my own goal.

Haha, how weak I am. Uh, I know that too. I've come to Zuellni, but I still haven't found my goal.

My school life is smooth.

It'd be great if I could find what I want to do in these six years. I can't be too lazy about it, but there's no point panicking.

How're you over there? I'm sure you're doing fine.

May you have a happy future.

To my dear Leerin Marfes,

Layfon Alseif.

He wanted money.

He didn't really care for the reputation that came with the Heaven's Blade. He thought learning the katana was the fastest way to earn money, as his Master had praised his talent with the katana.

Lance Shelled Grendan. It was fortunate he was born in this city that prospered on Military Arts. He didn't know his parents, but he was thankful of them for giving him talent with the katana.

He had to use this power to make money.

He lived for fifteen years with that purpose alone.

The luckiest thing that happened was that he became a successor of the Heaven's Blade before he was 14.

But he was still troubled by money.

The air of commotion stretched out from the locker room to the narrow corridor.

Layfon walked silently in the corridor. He let out a light sigh and tried to relieve the illusive pressure that was bearing down on him from the air.

But he couldn't do it.

He thought he had let it all out, but the irritating feeling rushed back into his chest. He felt his stomach, the pressure refusing to go away.

"Wuwu....."

"Are you all right?" Nina asked beside him.

".....I should ask you, senpai. You don't look well yourself."

"Don't talk nonsense. I'm very calm."

Despite her reply, it was clear that she didn't feel as calm. Her eyes were darting around, and her footsteps were less firm.

"Anyway, the 16th platoon is good at formations, but once a formation becomes shaky, there'll be an opening."

"You said that three times already."

Nina glared at him. He wasn't afraid of her getting mad. The light pink on the edge of her cheeks meant she was only covering up her embarrassment. Even so, he moved his gaze away from her.

"Listen. I'm sorry, but we can't rely much on Sharnid's support. I need him to move alone today. And Felli's progress in tracking enemies hasn't improved," she said with a sour expression.

Although they had been training since that day, Sharnid's long-distance shots failed to coordinate with the team's movement, and Felli's detection of enemies hadn't improved.

(Uh, of course.)

He didn't know what the deal was with Sharnid, but it was expected of Felli. She was determined not to work at her best so her brother would let her go.

(About that point, I'm the same.)

"This time we're on the offensive. As long as I don't fall, we won't lose. We'll respond depending on the situation today and win the match. Thank goodness my coordination with you has improved."

She thwacked a fist against Layfon's chest. It was a light strike, but he still coughed at the contact.

After platoon training, he always trained alone with Nina. Because of that, he could accurately read Nina's attack pattern, and she also seemed to understand how Layfon would react.

Nina mumbled as she looked at the map in her hand. This must be her strategic plan. She was thinking hard on how to win with the current strength of the team.

From dark bags under her blood-shot eyes, it was clear she was determined to win this match.

Yes, today, they had a platoon match.

Match. Just thinking of that word made his stomach hurt.

"I'm sorry. I need to go to the bathroom," Layfon apologized.

"Got it. I'll go ahead then," Nina said, still deeply absorbed in the map.

In the men's bathroom, Layfon splashed tap water onto his face. The coldness of the water cleared his head.

"Ugh, it's still not working."

The pain in his stomach hadn't subsided, and he could also feel the pressure in his chest.

"Damn."

"What's wrong? You don't look well." A voice floated over just as he was about to splash his face again. He didn't turn to address the owner of the voice, but he saw the other person's face in the mirror.

Felli would never have thought such a gentle smile could adorn Karian's face.

"......What do you want?"

"There's no need to be on guard. I'm here to give the new platoon some encouragement. I just saw you on the way here. You don't look well."

"I'm tense because it's almost time for the match."

Layfon didn't detect any pressure from Karian, the pressure he felt when he first met the Student President. But there was a certain dissatisfaction mixed up with the pain in Layfon's stomach. His gaze reflected in the mirror also looked worse.

"How could that be? This is child's play to you, Wolfstein."

"......It's meaningless no matter how many times you repeat that title. It doesn't belong to me anymore. I was expelled from Grendan and I don't have the Heaven Blade."

His disapproval of Karian.....Could be because of Felli's words. He resisted Karian who even used his own sister to reach his goal.

"And why is that? Are you not satisfied with me waiving your school fees? Speaking of which, you're still cleaning in the Central Mechanism Chamber. Do you still need money? If so....."

".....That isn't the problem."

"Then what's the issue? Layfon Alseif. The Heaven's Blade Wielder Wolfstein I know cares more about money than reputation ."

Karian didn't change his expression, but his words cut straight to the core. Layfon only collected himself at the huge noise that came from the floor tiles when he stomped on them.

Karian's reflection on the mirror maintained his smile.

"I don't know where you got that information from.....but it's incomplete."

"Um, just what's going on? Can you explain to me what kind of a person Wolfstein is?"

"No. That's something you don't have to know."

"It's fine if you don't tell me. I just want you to perform well in the fight."

Karian ended the conversation one-sidedly and went out into the corridor.

Layfon watched his back, having no desire to chase after him.

"Yes, yes....." Karian suddenly halted his steps.

"I hope you can stop your naive thinking that playing around in the match can get you back into General Studies. I've said so already. I'll do anything for the survival of the city. As long as something is useful to me, I'll use it."

"Even if it's your sister?"

"Even if it's my sister. Well, I'm going now."

Karian moved out of Layfon's sight. He must be heading for the locker room of the 17th platoon. Layfon stayed rooted to the spot. He didn't want to see Karian again in the locker room.

He sat on the edge of the sink, lifted his head to watch the ceiling with his hand covering his wet face.

"Ah~~Damn it!"

Letting out his emotion failed to alleviate the pain in his stomach.

Meishen looked at the basket resentfully on her knees.

"You can't help it. They said non-related personnel can't enter before the match," Mifi comforted her in the audience seat.

"......But....."

Meishen gazed at the basket regretfully. She got up early today just to make this bento.

"......Lay.....ton lives alone. He might not have had breakfast."

"Perhaps, but we didn't ask him to come out. Just forget it," Mifi said, pretending not to have heard the pause between "Lay" and " ton".

(Layfon? Layfon-kun? Just which one is it? Hmm, with Meishen's personality, it probably is Layfon-kun.....I don't think she'd want to call him just "Lay.")

Mifi thought so.

She knew Meishen greatly admired Layfon, that was why they became friends, but she never thought Meishen would have made him bento with her own two hands.

(Is there a chance? Layton seems pretty slow with this kind of thing.)

She looked at Meishen. Meishen was delicate and small. She was about the same height as Felli. Her face? It would be Felli's overwhelming win in that area. The two girls were of different types, but the girl in the 17th platoon was exactly like an exquisite doll. She gave off an illusive and dangerous allure from head to toe . Compared to her, Meishen definitely wasn't not cute, but she always had this about-to-cry look in between her eyebrows.

What about body build? Meishen had the advantage in this area . She was the most physically matured out of the three of them. Although her small stature didn't quite match, her body was so grown up that even Mifi herself felt inferior.

Even now, the surrounding males were boldly staring at the curve of her chest.

About chest size, the order went: Meishen, Mifi, and lastly Naruki. The order was reversed when it came to height.

(I'm always in the middle. It feels like I'm losing out.)

Meishen didn't let any boys get close to her because of her shyness, but at the same time, she was protected by many guys. Naruki's brave and bold personality also made it hard for anyone to get close, but everyone agreed she was beautiful.

(Only I'm not liked. I haven't received a love letter either.)

"What is it? Still sulking?" Naruki came back with some juice.

Naruki's short hair danced in the wind. She frowned at it. Both her hands were occupied with snacks and three paper cups of juice , so she couldn't smooth out her hair.

That pose suited her.

"It's unexpectedly crowded. I waited a long time in the queue..... .What's up?"

"......Nothing."

Mifi snatched up her own juice and snack, and lifted her gaze to watch the arena.

The uneven ground of the war field, dotted here and there with trees, was fenced in. Above was the camera of the Alchemy course, controlled by a Psychokinesist. It was currently being tested; The big screens facing the audience seats cycled through different areas of the field.

"Isn't it about time? When is Layton's match?"

Meishen should know, but why was Mifi angry? Naruki didn't get it.

"There are four matches today and Layton's is the third. How is the unknown 17th platoon gonna react to the speed of the 16th platoon? Everyone's interested in that, but the odds on them aren't good. Layton's team falls way behind."

"People are gambling on this?"

Sharp light shot from Naruki's eyes. Gambling over a platoon match was illegal. In Naruki's harness was a Dite with the symbol of the City Police on it.

"I didn't place a bet."

"Of course."

"Besides, it's useless for you to stop it. It hasn't received official permission, but it's mutually acknowledged. As long as they don't make a mess, the City Police won't do anything about it," Mifi said.

Naruki grunted, looking around with outrage in her eyes.

Mifi sighed.

"Really..... Why are all Military Artists obsessed? It's just entertainment."

"What nonsense! Military Arts is heaven's greatest gift to humanity. To dirty it through one's own desire....."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. What do you think of Layton's situation?" Mifi changed the subject.

Naruki thought for a moment.

"Well....." she said with a different feeling from before and touched her chin.

"I'm not sure how good his comrades are, but I think he's strong . Yes, that's what I think....."

"What is it?" Mifi said, noticing her hesitation.

"I've only trained with Internal-type Kei, but Layton's External-type Burst Kei isn't too bad. But I feel that...He himself isn't too keen on the match."

"Yes."

"......Layton, he wouldn't get hurt, would he?" Meishen said, a deep frown sitting between her eyebrows, as if she was about to cry.

Naruki smiled and shook her head. "They're using blunted weapons. We don't have to worry about him sustaining any injuries."

"Though, every year, the average number of people getting injured in Military Arts is around 300. It's three times more than other courses and it's mostly caused in training and matches."

Mifi's words made the tears fall from Meishen's eyes.

Naruki's fist connected with Mifi's head.

His stomach had stopped hurting, but now his brain felt dull and listless. Layfon wasn't keen on the match at all.

The team walked into the corridor, leaving the locker room for the match. Sunlight replaced the artificial light. The fervent atmosphere surrounded them.

"Ah!" Layfon voiced his annoyance at the unusual scene in the battlefield.

Numerous students sat in the audience section and a camera hovered in the air. One of the big screens showed the members of platoon 17.

"Not bad!"

Sharnid waved at the camera. Some students in the audience section shouted in shrill excitement. Sharnid's smile widened.

"This atmosphere suits me the best. I think I can perform three times better than usual!"

"I hope so," Nina said, coldly glancing at him, disapproving his flippant attitude. She then scanned the field.

"Except for the area we're now in, everything else is about the same as usual."

As Nina said, the terrain wasn't that different from usual.

"We can't be careless. The defense team might have set traps. Felli, search for the enemies and traps when the match begins. Can you handle both?"

"Who knows," Felli replied, supporting herself on her staff. Nina's expression turned harsh.

The atmosphere made Layfon feel weak on his shoulders.

The commentator for the match spoke through the loudspeaker, his voice full of energy. The match was about to begin. Layfon restored his Dite.

He held a greenish blue sword.

In the past, he held it because of money.

But now?

The light from the green Dite didn't have Kei in it. It was simply reflecting the ray of the sun. The beautiful and empty light weighed down on Layfon.

It was all because of his recklessness at the opening ceremony. He was hassled by the riot. Before he knew what was happening, he had suppressed the culprits of the riot.

Why did he do that? He regretted his action.

"Really."

"Hmm? What is it?"

He spoke in a whisper, but Nina had heard it.

"Nothing."

The siren signaling the beginning of the match drowned out his reply.

"Time to go," Nina said.

Layfon followed behind her.

Inside the Student President's room, Karian watched the screen. Both camps in the match had moved out after the siren sounded. Karian's gaze followed the attacker who was dragging his greenish blue sword behind and clumsily chasing after his captain.

"Is this the guy that the Student President admires?"

The owner of the voice was a Military Student, standing before the office desk. With an awe-inspiring countenance, the muscular man patted the beard on his chin, watching the screen.

"His movements are clumsy and his flow of Kei is really bad. Did he really suppress the riot in the opening ceremony?"

"The very same, Military Arts' Commander Vance."

"Ha?"

Vance Hardy, Commander of Military Arts – the representative of the Military Arts course leaned on the office desk, watching the screen with incomprehension.

"Well then, he lacks enthusiasm. What a useless guy. This includes the one who transferred him into Military Arts."

Karian shrugged and avoided eye contact.

"I can guarantee his true ability. No one in Zuellni can be his opponent if he's serious. This is only a gathering for a group of novices, an amateurish organization. To one who immersed himself in the professional world for so many years, this match is a child's game."

"We're betting our lives on this game."

"Yes, even if it's a game , the ideal we hold to keep the city alive is the same, but he doesn't seem to understand that."

"And there's also your sister."

"Have you a different opinion, Commander?"

"Of course. The two who lack enthusiasm and the Sharnid with real power but no cooperation. As the Military Arts Commander and the one who is responsible for the city's defense, I have a lot to complain about for giving Nina a platoon with so many issues. It makes more sense to put her in another platoon and nurture her that way."

"Wasn't she the one who refused that proposal?"

Vance shut his mouth.

"Two years ago, everyone had huge expectations for her. She was accepted into a platoon when she was only in first year. But she'd changed her mind since we failed in the Military Arts competition. She formed her own team because of that. She chose Sharnid herself. I gave her the other two, but I did it with the belief that she could use them well."

"I'm against her forming a platoon."

"Unfortunately, I have the final say."

"......Are you planning to destroy the future of an excellent student!?" Vance roared and struck the desk with his fist. The air vibrated. He was twice as muscular as Karian, but the Student President remained calm.

"Only if this city survives," Karian waved away the vibrating air . "Can you guarantee we'll win in the next competition?"

The gentle smiled disappeared. Karian challenged Vance with a gaze as sharp as the blade of a knife. The Commander lifted his thick eyebrows and accepted the challenge.

"There are no absolutes in war," Vance said.

"Yes, but I still want an absolute guarantee. We must win to guarantee the survival of this city. Humans can't live without the city. This cold world rejects us. I think you should know the meaning of losing a city?"

What was outside the city – The few plants that managed to survive on this polluted earth were poisonous. The only survivors were the filth monsters that had overcome the poison.

Unable to survive in this harsh world, humans could only live in an artificial world – in a mobile city.

"Of course I understand that. But this is an Academy. It's a place of learning. I won't abandon good students!"

"I'm nurturing them."

"How so?"

"You can obtain something by failing. Humans grow through failures. The greatest proof of maturity is what one obtains through enormous suffering. My sister and Layfon Alseif haven't yet understood this point, so I've thrown them over there."

"Meaning this platoon is full of abandoned students?"

"They haven't been abandoned. You can only make conclusions after the result."

"In the end, even you can't guarantee the result."

Karian nodded as if this was natural. "There's nothing absolute about people. If it exists, I'll become a mad believer."

He moved his gaze back to the screen.

The camera controlled by Psychokinesis was filming a certain area of the war field.

Layfon's desperate expression, his face stuck with sweat and dust, appeared on the screen.

"In this life and death situation, you'll be suspected. Have you truly given up? Or have you not?" Karian's murmuring turned Vance's gaze to the screen too.

The 17th platoon was losing.

A platoon must have at least four fighting members.

Yes, that was written in the Military Arts handbook. The 17th platoon had four people, so it fulfilled the minimal number. Harley wasn't in the count as he wasn't a fighter.

Then what about the maximum number?

Seven people.

The 16th platoon had five fighting members. This was already counted as a small platoon. Usually, a platoon had seven fighting members.

Preparing the fighting strength of the team was an absolute must to win and survive, but the 17th platoon lacked this.

The excuse of not having enough time made no difference in the field. The excuse of the losing team was just a dog's barking, not worth listening to. Besides, Nina had no intention of giving voice to it.

The 17th platoon lacked the strength of one more member.

He couldn't help but think that the result could be overturned.

Truly, that was what Layfon was thinking, even though he didn't plan to win.

How naive of him.

When the siren sounded, he and Nina rushed forward to the enemy base. They had to eliminate the entire enemy team to win,

or make them lose their fighting capability and destroy the flag they were protecting. On the other hand, the defense team had to either defeat the captain of the enemy team or protect their flag within the time limit. The defense team could set traps in the field before the match, so they had the advantage if they were to just keep on the defensive side.

It was like this because the victory conditions in a real Military Arts competition were the defeat of the enemy's forces or the destruction of the city's Central Mechanism, which was represented by the flag.

"The other team will probably choose to defend. All they need to do is protect their flag until the time limit," Nina said in the locker room.

"Me and Layfon will act as bait. During that time, Sharnid is to snipe the flag. It's an old-fashioned but realistic plan."

"Layfon, the first problem we'll face is getting through the traps as fast as we can. The 16th platoon can't easily detect Sharnid's Kei, but we'll have to attract the Psychokinesist's attention with our speed. Our mission is to confuse the other team."

That was why the two of them were running on the uneven ground and heading straight for the front line of the opposing team. They moved at their highest speed while running through bushes and staying alert for traps.

Something felt wrong.

"Layfon, be careful," Nina said from behind. She felt it too.

There weren't any traps.

On the ground could be simple traps like pits, nets, conductive wires.....and bundles of grass to trip one's feet.....They didn't find any mines controlled by Psychokinesis. Except for the changes made to the terrain for the match, nothing else looked different.

On Nina's gesture, Layfon stopped running and hid inside the shadow of the bush.

"Felli, have you found the enemy's position?"

"Two reactions in the enemy camp, and three at the front. None of the targets are moving," Felli answered lightly through the transmitter. The opponents didn't plan to hide any of their moves.

"They plan to receive our attack without reducing our strength through traps? Are we being underestimated?" Nina mumbled.

Another voice came through the transmitter. "This is Sharnid. I'm in position. There's something blocking my target, but this is the best position I could find. If there's a better opening, I guarantee my shot will hit."

So he planned to hit the obstacle before sniping the flag. But with that much time wasted, both the Psychokinesist and people who could use External-type Burst Kei might discover Sharnid's position. He'd become the target of the enemy's sniper.

"Wait a minute. Just stay there and wait for your order."

"Roger. I'll shoot if a chance presents itself."

"I'm counting on you."

Nina's gaze threw out a question at Layfon.

(What do we do?)

He knew they could only keep on moving. The 16th platoon couldn't be unaware of the two of them. Even so, three members of the enemy team hadn't made a move, meaning they planned to receive attacks head-on.

And if the 17th platoon didn't take any action, the enemies would remain where they were till the time ran out. They would win.

There was only one thing left to do.

Fight the enemy. In a 2 vs 5 fight, the 17th platoon was at a disadvantage.

"Geez," Layfon complained in a low voice. Although the situation was as predicted, this was exactly what the other team had planned.

(What do we do next?)

Layfon's gaze reflected his question, and Nina wordlessly nodded. Now they had to rush the front line, just as they had agreed. He didn't understand why she was full of confidence. Her voice came through his transmitter.

"We'll follow the original plan. We'll draw the attackers into the front section of the field. Aim for the ground when we get there and use the smoke to confuse the enemy."

"Just don't get in my line of sight!" Sharnid said.

Felli asked for Sharnid's position, and Nina gave Layfon an order.

"Draw the enemy to the west."

The two of them signaled through eye contact. Layfon emerged from the bush, followed closely by Nina. As he ran, he extended his Kei to his blade. The Kei flowed like blood. This was a Kei vein. It connected Layfon's palm to the sword so the blade became a part of his body. The blade gave off a clear, blue light that was unlike that of the sun's. Layfon could feel the murky feeling from the blade.

Because he could feel the blade as if it had grown a nervous system overnight, he experienced the unnatural, numb and irritating feeling.....a novice might be satisfied at this stage, but not Layfon. He needed it to be more intense. The colour of his Kei could be more vivid, more exciting.

The color of Kei on his blade looked so unsightly!

He clamped down his teeth to suppress his desire. He knew his best Kei wasn't of this level. But what would it do to use his best Kei here? What did he want to do? Nothing. He couldn't use his full power because he didn't know what he wanted to do.

What he was searching for wasn't the gem-like color of his Kei.

"Layfon!"

The shrill voice came not from the transmitter. He realized his consciousness had drifted off. He gazed back at the scene before him, but his heart was not in it.

When he collected himself, he was in a sea of dust.

In the moment they emerged from the bushes, their enemies had also arrived with high speed. And that speed had filled the air with dust and soil particles, blocking out the sun and dimming the surrounding area.

Layfon stopped running. He looked around, sensing Nina behind him.

"Look closely at the flow of the air!" Nina's order came through his transmitter.

He was irritated.

How could she give him such a basic method of searching?

Gritting his teeth, he watched the dust whirls before him.

Three dust whirls.

He slashed out with the sword, the pressure extending to his wrists. There were two pressures, canceling each other. One pressure flowed through Layfon's body, causing him to kneel on the ground.

Nina kept silent.

She was directing her attack at another whirl.

"Whirl Kei (Senkei)....." he murmured, then rolled away from his current position to confirm the situation.

Three figures separated Layfon and Nina.

This was an Internal-type Kei technique. It could strengthen the legs tremendously and made high speed movement possible. These three must have gone through special training in Whirl Kei.

After confirming their positions, the enemies had used their attack to confuse their vision, then executed a speedy attack with Whirl Kei. Their execution was flawless. They must have had special training in it.

They didn't need to set up traps at all. The simultaneous attack of the Whirl Kei was the biggest trap.

(But.....)

That strategy had also given Layfon's team a chance. He and Nina had completely attracted the enemy's attention. Next, they only needed to make an opening for Sharnid.....

And he realized his foolishness.

Three people separated him and Nina. Once Nina fell, they would have lost.

"Senpai!"

Layfon couldn't get up because of the numbness in his knees. The pressure of the high speed attack remained in his body, preventing him from using his strength.

As he was trying to get up, one of the opponents rushed to him again with a high-speed Whirl Kei attack. Dust filled the air. A presence that Layfon couldn't see with his eyes was closing in. He blocked the attack with his sword. The instability of his legs caused him to fly through the air and he fell, rolling on the ground.

The pressure of the attack ran through his body. Sparks exploded in his vision. He had almost hit his head on the ground. Even so, he still had to get back up. He saw Nina defending from a Whirl Kei attack with her iron whips.

Rooted tightly on the spot, she held tight to her two irons whips , receiving the high speed strikes.

Compared to attacking, she was probably better at defense. She watched her two opponents calmly, and used her External-type Burst Kei to minimize the force of the strikes.

Which was completely different from the clumsy-looking Layfon, rolling on the ground like a fool. In Nina's eyes was an indomitable light. The two iron whips spoke true of her determination.

That pose was like a firm iron fortress.

He had no time to be fascinated by the scene.

Again, he blocked an attack with his sword, and fell tumbling on the dusty ground.

"This is annoying!" Layfon's attacker said. Layfon couldn't see his opponent's expression through the dust screen, but he understood the enemy was frustrated that Layfon could block the speedy attacks despite his clumsiness.

Another strike. Layfon once again tumbled across the earth. He was worse than a rolling stone. All he heard was the vibration deep in his ears. He couldn't hear any external noise properly. His head had been hit numerous times and his consciousness began to dim.

(Why am I doing this?)

He staggered to his feet and was still considering this question as he once again received another attack, only to fall rolling on the ground.

(It doesn't matter if we lose, right?)

This wasn't a fight to determine the fate of the city. This was just a school activity. It shouldn't matter if they lost. The Academy City wouldn't lose its Electronic Fairy because of it.

Even so, why was he letting the enemy attack him? For what purpose was he sustaining all these injuries? He couldn't comprehend what he was doing.

(It shouldn't matter if we lose?)

He confirmed once more.

(Yes. It doesn't matter.)

It was all right to throw away his sword. It was all right to stay still and not get up. It was unnecessary to make himself more tired and muddy. He had a break today, but he had to clean the Central Mechanism Chamber tomorrow. It wouldn't do to waste his strength here. He might even fall ill.

It wasn't good to damage his physical condition, otherwise he couldn't make any money. He was an orphan without anyone to rely on, so he needed money. No one would send him an allowance. He could only rely on the scholarship. Sure, his school fees were waived, but if the Student President changed his mind,

all the privileges would disappear. To save up for his future, he must make money.

Money, money, money.....

All of a sudden, he subconsciously looked at the sword held tightly in his hand. Light still emitted from the green Dite.

(It was always money on my lips in the past.)

He didn't hate himself. In truth, money was necessary.

(Wasn't there something else?)

Only that he was more desperate in the past. Not for himself, but for the running of the orphanage. The Head of the orphanage, his adopted father, the person who first saw the potential of katana skill in Layfon, his Master, viewed money as trash. To put it in a worse light, he had no concept of money. So they were always troubled with finances. When Layfon found out he had the talent for the katana, he had decided to use this ability to earn money. For that purpose, he was determined to obtain a Heaven's Blade and become the best fighter in Grendan. In Layfon's heart, he didn't hold any simple and innocent admiration for the strong. He was only realistically following the rules of the world and from there, chose his path.

And now, he only needed to make money for himself. Enough money to keep on living. This was in itself difficult, but he didn't have to be as desperate as before.

(Don't I have something more important?)

He contemplated while rolling on the ground, his brain almost empty from sustaining repeated hits.

For example, the opposite sex.

(How naive.)

He was disappointed that this was the first thing that came to mind. But because of this thought, the face of his childhood friend, Leerin, surfaced. And lastly was the feeling of their lips touching.

(But what can I do for Leerin?)

Nothing. He wanted her to see him finding his purpose in this city – A Layfon who had succeeded in something other than the katana. But this felt different from what he wanted to do for Leerin . A gap forever separated people in different mobile cities, then perhaps, in his heart, he failed to look at Leerin as someone other than his childhood friend.

The touch of her lips made him realize she was female, but he still failed to look at her as someone of the opposite sex.

(We're like siblings, even though we aren't related by blood.)

It was a feeling nurtured through living in the same orphanage. That couldn't be helped.

(Then.....)

Then who? As he thought of that, only Nina was in his line of sight. She stood in the Military Arts world that Layfon had given up. He envied her bright and dazzling form.

And he remembered three other students. One of them was in Military Arts, but they were all striving for what they wanted to do. He was jealous of that bright form.

Felli's experience was similar to his. A girl who believed she had no other choice but to follow the footsteps of her inborn ability . Although the road she had gone through to arrive here was different from his, he could understand her feeling on Naruki and her friends. They were too dazzling.

(Ahah, what a mess.)

What could he do for them? Nothing?

He thought, rolling again on the ground. His opponent continued to prattle off his reproofs under his breath. Things like " Hurry up and fall." "This is so annoying." "I don't have time for this."

What could he do? What did he want to do?

He couldn't think up an answer.

Not even an answer as tiny as the tip of his finger nail.

How troublesome.

He finally looked around him. He hadn't been counting, so he wasn't sure how many times he had been falling and climbing back to his feet. The dead end of his thoughts forced him back into the present.

".....Senpai?" he muttered, toppling onto the ground from another attack.

The sight he then saw in that one single moment was vividly carved into his mind.

She was kneeling on one knee.

No matter how good she was at defense, there had to be a limit. The accumulated injuries had taken away the strength in her legs.

She had become less responsive. The Kei receiving the high-speed attack was losing its strength. The light of her Kei flow in the iron whips had lost its vitality.

(No!)

Senpai will fall.

Senpai will fall.

The platoon will fail.

Fail.

The team will be disbanded.

Senpai will never get back her spirit.

Such naive thoughts surfaced one after another in Layfon's head .

(This won't do.)

And till now, the thought of losing had already disappeared. Layfon picked himself up.

"You're so annoying!" His opponent howled and closed in for another high-speed attack.

Layfon jumped aside. He already knew the position of his opponent. Since the movement was based on Whirl Kei, what came next was just a straight path to Layfon. Once Layfon timed the moment of his enemy's move, determining his opponent's position wouldn't be a problem at all.

The important point was how to judge the timing.

Forgetting about the man who just sped past him, Layfon raised his sword.

"That's a bit far."

Because he'd been rolling on the ground, he now stood a fair bit of a distance from Nina. Even if he ran over now, he wouldn't make it in time.

"In that case....."

He slashed out with his sword. He wasn't even thinking of the Kei flowing through his blade. This was a natural movement for him. Changing the quality of the Kei on his Dite, the Kei shot out of his blade on the momentum of its slashing movement.

It wasn't the same as shooting out Kei. He focused his Kei on one point only.

This was one of the moves of the External-type Burst Kei – Needle Kei (Shin Kei).

Kei sharp as needles struck one of the members of the 16th platoon and sent him sailing through the air.

While the other attacker was spacing out at his suddenly flying comrade, Layfon extended his Kei to his feet.

An Internal-type Kei -- Whirl Kei.

As he headed for Nina, he used his sword to send another attacker flying.

He stopped behind Nina and searched around for more enemies. The two people he had sent flying through the air had not returned to the field. He couldn't feel any hostile Kei. Those two must have fainted.

"You....."

Layfon didn't understand Nina's surprise. What was so surprising about that?

Just when he was confused over this, the siren rang.

"The flag's been destroyed! The 17th platoon wins!"

The commentator shouted excitedly. The audience roared in commotion.

"Hahaha! Did you see? I destroyed the flag with two shots, as promised," Sharnid's excited voice came through the transmitter.

But it sounded far away to Layfon.

He toppled.

Chapter 5: Point of difference

This is my fourth letter but I still haven't received yours. I'm beginning to worry that you haven't been getting mine.

Honestly, I'm feeling a bit down.

What is it like to have a dream?

I'm beginning to understand that feeling.

I feel that.....It's innocent and dazzling, like something at the bottom of a cave. No matter how much you stretch out your hand, you can't reach it. A place of deep despair.

The good friends I've made here shine from a place that I can never reach.

You also shine with light.

Back then, I didn't understand how you could be so diligent and hardworking for such a boring thing. I was too desperate to live, and because of that, I missed the point.

What forced me to become like that? I was running away. It's unsightly of me to place the blame elsewhere.

Now, I don't find your goal boring. It's the opposite: I'm envious of you.

Can I still grasp hold of it? Grasp hold of the thing on the very bottom, the unreachable.....The thing that might not even be there.

I'm struggling with whether I should send this letter or not. Useless content.

But I still think I should send this. I want to hear your opinion. Don't complicate it. I just want to hear what you think.

I want to read your reply to this letter.

Your dream is and has always been dazzling. Please don't lose it.

To my dear Leerin Marfes,

Layfon Alseif.

Nina walked in a brusque manner along the corridor, stomping the floor with force. A girl passing by, holding a pile of documents and who seemed to be a member of the Student Council quickly moved aside for her.

It was natural for the girl to be startled. Dust and soil particles were stuck to Nina's forehead and cheeks. Her golden hair was dirty and messy, and even her Military Arts uniform was in tatters. There weren't many students who would walk around with that appearance full of anger.

Nina was outraged. She wasn't quite sure why she was incensed , but she was currently throwing a tantrum.

Unquestioning of the anger inside her, she had stomped over here after the match, propelled by her emotion. Layfon had fainted when the siren rang out and was carried away on a stretcher. There wasn't anything unusual with the flow of his Kei, so he must have just lost consciousness.

"Just what was that about?" Nina let out her words in resentment and pounded heavily on the door of the Student President's room.

"Come in."

Before the reply came through, she had already pushed open the door on her own.

Besides the bitterly smiling Karian, Vance was also in the room. Vance's presence calmed her down. She halted her steps.

"Third year, Military Arts, Nina Antalk is coming in."

"Please."

Karian said that and then praised her.

"Congratulations on your first win."

Nina's brow furrowed. "......Just what was that?"

"Uh.....What do you mean?"

"Layfon Alseif. You know he's not a normal person, don't you?"

"Why do you think so?"

"This is all too strange. He really did well in the opening ceremony, but before his ability was confirmed, you transferred him into Military Arts and nominated him to join my platoon. During that time, there must have been lots of people thinking you were just blinded by his brilliant performance. But you didn't take any action afterwards..... Your personality would've made that impossible."

"But you accepted Layfon. Don't you admire his performance today?"

"I tested him."

She'd had Felli bring him to the training room and had measured his strength. At that time, she didn't feel Layfon was hiding his true strength. She'd felt that if he had more training, his strength could exceed that of the existing members.

But that judgment was completely in error.

The issue wasn't that Layfon could become stronger after more training. He didn't need training at all.

She saw Layfon's true strength in the platoon match just then. Needle Kei (Shin Kei) and Whirl Kei (Senkei) .....He couldn't have mastered that power in a short period of time.

Vance nodded in agreement. He glanced at the screen that was about to broadcast the fourth match, and turned his gaze back to Karian.

"You seem to know who Layfon Alseif is. Did you know of his identity before this match?"

Karian shook his head.

"It's not that easy to obtain intelligence on other cities."

The other two people in the room weren't convinced.

"I only found out about him by chance." He raised his hands in surrender.

"How did you two come to this academy?" Karian asked.

"On a roaming bus of course."

"Obviously by riding the roaming buses. Normally, we can only travel between cities by riding the roaming buses, but what I mean is the route."

"Route?"

"Yes. All the roaming buses eventually return back to the Traffic City Joeldem and then depart from there. Only the consciousness of Joeldem knows the current positions of all the mobile cities. But sometimes a roaming bus might not come directly from Joeldem. It might go around to other cities before arriving here."

Nina nodded. She had passed three cities before arriving at Zuellni.

"Did you pass through Grendan?" Nina asked.

Karian nodded. "It took me three months to arrive at Zuellni. During my travels, I had a two week layover in Grendan. It wasn't boring over there at all because of the numerous Military Arts matches being held. Fortunately, I saw a Heaven's Blade successor match."

"Heaven's Blade?"

Nina glanced at Vance. Vance didn't seem to know of it, so she waited for Karian to explain.

"That isn't just a title for the twelve best Military Artists in the Lance Shelled City, Grendan.....A certain special item also comes with that title, but as an outsider, I have no idea what it is."

While listening to Karian, Nina thought of what might have happened.

Layfon was from Grendan. That was true. Since Karian rode the roaming bus to Zuellni for first year study, this meant he must have stayed at Grendan five years ago.

Five years ago? .....Layfon wasn't even ten years old!

"How is that possible....."

"I know there are geniuses in this world. But even I was greatly moved by his performance. I was so surprised I was speechless. I don't have the talent for Military Arts, but everyone watching that match was all shocked by the scene."

A kid, who might not even be ten years old yet, easily wielded the long sword and defeated an adult.

"It wasn't just men, everyone was overwhelmed and shocked. It was a rare and extraordinary scene. A kid could actually reach the summit of the Military Arts world! I couldn't forget that name. When I saw his name on the scholarship application, it was impossible for me to miss it. For him to settle in Zuellni, at this time, is like the birth of a savior. At the same time, I didn't understand why he left Grendan and wanted to specialize in

General Studies. No, actually, I wasn't surprised at him entering General Studies. He doesn't need anyone to teach him Military Arts. Even so, I was still curious about the real reason behind his decision, so I did some investigating, and the results arrived at my desk the day before the opening ceremony."

"So....."

Nina swallowed, trying to remove the feeling of something sticking to her throat.

Right.

She suddenly realized why she was so angry.

She got it now. Layfon hadn't used his true strength during training. Never mind that. What was unforgivable was the fact that he deliberately lost to her when they first fought. He could have defeated her easily, but he chose to lose to her.

It felt like an insult to Nina.

Even so, the truth might not be what it appeared to be on the surface.

She suppressed her anger and thought more calmly. Perhaps the excited Karian could calm her down further.

What was Military Arts to Layfon? Perhaps he didn't like it. If he liked it, even though he didn't need any training, he would have entered Military Arts.

(Speaking of which.....)

She remembered. Didn't he say that when they were eating supper at the Mechanical Department?

"Not Military Arts. I've already failed it."

She had forgotten that soon afterward, distracted by the Electronic Fairy. But thinking of it now, his words seemed to hide some deeper meaning.

Failed? Just what was that about?

The Layfon who was a top Military Artist in Grendan. Just what mistake did he make?

"He....."

Nina almost perked up her ears by reflex.

She wanted to know.

But then, perhaps she shouldn't be listening to this. If she knew, she might not let Layfon stay in the platoon. Perhaps she wouldn't be able to forgive him.

Just when her heart was swaying in two directions, Karian continued.

"He had tainted the reputation of a Heaven's Blade successor."

Something bad must have happened if he woke up in the hospital.

"I'm here again....."

Layfon awoke and realized what he had done. He held his head , hating himself.

He felt it and found many lumps on it. No wonder it felt as if his head was cramping.

"Aah....."

As he moaned, trying to escape the pain, his eyes wandered around the surrounding room and saw something placed on the bench. Something that looked like a big basket and three female schoolbags. Then, rowdy noises drifted in from the corridor, and the door was pushed open.

"Ah, Layton's up!" Mifi said loudly with a paper cup in hand. Meishen and Naruki were standing behind her.

"How do you feel? Are you all right? Speaking of which, you were incredible. You gave me such a scare."

Layfon smiled sourly and sat up on the bed.

"I didn't know you were that strong. The last two moves were amazing," Naruki said.

Naruki said that because she was also in Military Arts. The bitterness on Layfon's face deepened.

Noticing Layfon's look, she changed her expression.

"......So are you alright?"

Layfon took the juice from Meishen. The juice refreshed his thirsty throat. He drank as if to allow the liquid to seep through his entire body.

"Thanks. I feel much better."

Meishen's face reddened. She lowered her head and half-ran from the side of the bed to the long bench.

"......Um, if you're hungry, I've got a bento....."

"Uh, thank you."

Layfon got off the bed, made his way to the long bench and looked into the basket. It was divided into two sections. One held sandwiches; the other had things wrapped in paper that seemed to be baked biscuits.

"I am hungry."

He hadn't eaten as his stomach had hurt since early this morning. Looking at the basket, now he wanted to eat.

He took a sandwich and bit into it. Feeling the look Meishen was giving him, he ate the sandwich in two bites and washed it down with juice.

"It's delicious!"

Meishen's tense expression turned into a blossoming smile.

"Uh....."

Layfon hesitated, his hand reaching out for more.

"We aren't hungry. It's okay if you eat it all."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just eat it all," Naruki and Mifi said. Meishen nodded. So he took another sandwich.

"I'll go buy some juice."

"I'm going with you."

The girls' sudden movements alarmed Meishen.

".....Wha- you two!" she protested.

"Don't worry. We'll buy your share," Naruki said to Meishen, who was waving at them in agitation.

"Oh, almost forgot. Your platoon's going to celebrate the victory . We've been invited too."

"Oh, okay, got it," Layfon replied.

Recalling the match brought a shadow over him, but eating took priority. Naruki and Mifi left the room.

Now that they were left alone in the room, Meishen had lost her composure. Sitting next to Layfon, she fidgeted and played with her fingers, her eyes darting around.

After finishing the fourth sandwich and settling his stomach, he noticed Meishen's peculiar behaviour.

(Ah, is she shy?)

And he felt awkward and embarrassed. It was bad of Naruki and Mifi to leave her when they knew she'd become like this.

"I'm sorry for making you make the bento."

".....Not at all. It's a.....th.....thank you."

"Thank you?"

".....You saved me."

Recalling what he did in the opening ceremony, he shook his head.

"That was nothing."

He wasn't thinking of saving her. His body just moved on its own.

That was all there was to it.

"......But, I was still saved."

"Then I'll gratefully receive your goodwill, but I've almost eaten it all."

Meishen laughed lightly at the joke. Feeling embarrassed, Layfon grabbed another sandwich.

"......Lay......ton. You're strong," Meishen whispered as he finished up the last sandwich.

"No......not at all."

Even though he wanted to deny it, he knew inside him was another "him" who couldn't deny himself. He understood he had extraordinary strength in Military Arts. He tried his all to hide it. He didn't know how the Student President found out, but he thought he could solve this issue since Karian didn't seem to have leaked the secret.

But he had dashed that hope in today's match.

There must be a student here from Grendan. Those who thought they had mistaken him for someone else would now know he was a Heaven's Blade successor.

"......You're really strong. Like how you struck down those two instantly......"

The huge screen set in the audience section must have broadcast his image.

".....But, why didn't you defeat them before?"

The question he had been dreading now lay before him. He noticed the smell of earth on his clothes. The Medical students had dusted off some of the soil on Layfon before putting him in bed, but that wasn't enough to clean the dirty clothes. While thinking of that, he remembered the pain in his head.

(I must have rolled too much on the ground.)

In the arena, Layfon had difficulty thinking because of his head bumping here and there. He thought back to the scene of Nina receiving repeated attacks. Compared to him, irrespective of the difference in their real strength, Nina was not allowing her concentration to falter from pain.

"I wasn't planning on winning."

He decided to be honest.

"I don't care about the me who trained in Military Arts. I didn't start training in it because I liked it. I didn't have anyone encouraging me to study it. I learned it because I had to."

"Besides, Military Arts isn't necessary to me anymore, so I'm abandoning it," he said in small voice.

Meishen watched him with wide eyes.

If.....if he was more used to it, he might have lost the match with more beauty. That was what he thought, but he was unable to do so in battle. As long as he held a weapon.....even if he wasn't doing his best, he always fought seriously. This had nothing to do with the strength of the opponent. He had no feelings besides a desire to fight seriously for the result of victory.

"I told you before that I'm an orphan, didn't I?"

Meishen nodded and moved away her awkward gaze.

"The Head of our orphanage was terrible with money, so he was always having trouble with it. Looking at the dwindling food, I guessed the Head must be losing money again. I was always afraid that one day, there might not be food at all."

At that time, he encountered the way of the katana.

"I was told I had a gift with the katana, so I decided to make money with it. I participated in all kinds of matches and won lots of prize money....."

And before he knew it, he had become a Heaven's Blade successor.

Perhaps people who dreamed of becoming a Heaven's Blade successor would be outraged by his words. To him, though, this was his truth. This was the value the title "Heaven's Blade" held for him. It was only a step on the path to his goal.

"The situation at the orphanage improved because of the prize money. Everyone was grateful to me."

"......So, you then decided not to train in Military Arts again?"

"Yes, since there was enough money. Unfortunately, it isn't enough for my school fees. That can't be helped, so I had to earn money through some other means."

"......Don't you miss it at all?"

Layfon smiled naturally and nodded. "Yeah, but I still haven't found out what I want to do....."

"......You'll definitely find it," Meishen said in a light and shy voice. She hunched her shoulders, her body seeming to become even smaller.

"But....."

Looking at the floor, she added,"......You were incredible.....in the match.....But you were a bit devious."

"Huh?"

"......Why did you win if you'd decided to lose the match?"

"....."

He wanted to say he couldn't think properly because of his injured head, but on second thought, he swallowed the words. It wasn't a good enough reason; besides, he didn't want Meishen to know more about it.

"......Layton, you have your own way of thinking. I don't know much.....about winning or losing matches.....but, if you've decided to lose, I think it's better to lose the match. It's not so good to change halfway through.....About finding what I like doing, I can't properly explain why I like making sweets. I don't know how to discover an interest, so I can't give you any suggestions....."

She paused as if to take a deep breath, and then continued, "But the Lay.....ton I saw at the opening ceremony was cool. I want to see the Layton from back then."

Her face was all red. Then she added a light "Sorry."

Layfon remained silent, and could only shake his head.

Afterward, he chatted a bit with Naruki and Mifi. They all decided to part ways before tonight's celebration party.

Back in the dormitory, Layfon took off his dirty clothes and went to have a shower.

Coming back to the room, refreshed, he looked at the paper bag on the desk.

In it were Meishen's biscuits.

"I don't really like sweets."

He had taken the package with him without opening it, not wanting to refuse her.

Now he opened the paper bag. The sealed-off aroma of sugar rushed out to pat his nose. He wasn't sure why, but it smelled like Meishen. The image of Meishen surfaced in his mind. Because of her passion for making sweets, she was doing a job she wasn't

good at. He recalled how she peeked at him eating sandwiches, her face lowered and pink.

He popped a biscuit into his mouth.

"......So sweet."

Of course.

But he didn't hate the sweetness on his tongue. It was good for the body to eat something sweet when tired.

"Aah~" Holding the bag in one hand, he fell into a sitting position. He brushed aside the hair falling across his eyes, and gazed at the floor.

He had lied to Meishen.

To put it correctly, he had hidden from her things that would disadvantage him in her eyes. This way, nobody would get hurt.

But he resented himself for only wanting to maintain his good image.

Either way, his pretense had been exposed. He was useless in the match. He didn't plan on winning, but the other half of him had taken action for victory. It seemed as if he was hiding his real strength so as to hoard the spotlight in the end.

Besides, what could he do after winning?

Go back to train in Military Arts?

No.

Well.....

"Just what do I want to do?"

Who knew how many times he had asked that question already ? But he still had to ask. What did he have besides Military Arts?

Was there anything else he could do?

Nothing. He just wanted to be doing something. He walked on a path with no dream and no obstacles. All he wanted was to try walking on a path, relying on himself.

He hadn't even decided on where to go.

And he came to Zuellni for that purpose. But the situation of the Academy and the Student President who knew of his past were denying him the chance to discover his own interest.

Layfon grabbed another biscuit. Meishen probably knew he didn't like sweets, so she had made them with less sugar. They tasted nice.

Her consideration pained him. It reproached him.

What was he like, the "cool Layfon" in her eyes?

"It really is.....so sweet....."

He ate another biscuit.

The day after the platoon match passed by smoothly. It was now night.

Naruki walked near the fighting arena with a flashlight in one hand. On her breast was a City Police badge. A baton hung from her harness. She was patrolling with a Military Arts senpai.

"Is that first year in the 17th platoon your classmate?"

"Yes."

A wry smile crossed Naruki's face at the curiosity of her senpai.

A great number of people had moved over to the busier part of the city at night, so the areas surrounding the arena were quiet and empty. Some people would use this chance to carry out activities here, such as lovers doing something indecent, and students in Alchemy and Engineering conducting illegal experiments.

Still, this patrol was a leisurely job.

Senpai told her of what the Alchemy students did here and how students from the Engineering department used their machines for underground gambling matches. And somehow, the conversation came to focus on Layfon.

"He's amazing. Not that many in Military Arts can reach his level. Just who is he?"

"Who knows.....He doesn't talk much about himself."

It was more like Layfon himself didn't want to talk about his past. His unenthusiastic expression was all the answer that people received for the various questions that they threw at him yesterday in the celebration party.

"I just know he's from Grendan."

"Grendan? Ah, I see. But not everyone knows Military Arts even in Grendan. Oh, speaking of which....."

"What?"

"A Military Artist came here from Grendan last year. A good-for-nothing. What an absolute horror in group training," she said, trying to suppress her laughter.

".....What was so horrible?"

"Oh, I haven't finished. If one enters the Military Arts course, one should have trained in the basics of Internal-type or External Burst-type Kei, right? That girl kept boasting about her Kei and

how it was just a basic level in Grendan, but in real combat, she couldn't even reach the lowest level. The other girls finished her off so easily. She ended up withdrawing from the course after only half a year. We all thought Grendan wasn't that great, but after watching yesterday's match, it looks like it's not just all talk about Grendan."

"Are there only a few students from Grendan?"

"Well, I only know that girl from Grendan. Grendan seems to have moved very far away from Zuellni in these past few years. Isn't it safer to go to a closer Academy City? So I don't think students from Grendan would come all the way out here. Perhaps that girl thought she wouldn't have to use Kei if she went to a place far away from Grendan," Senpai giggled.

Naruki sank into contemplation. Couldn't the example of the female student fit Layfon?

It made more sense to enter an Academy City closer to home. This minimized the potential danger of spending too much time on a roaming bus. It was impossible to know the exact location of a city, but the Traffic Department was able to guess its location through the whereabouts and number of traveling days of various roaming buses. Even Naruki and her friends used the information from the Traffic Department to narrow down their options and finally picked Zuellni.

(Did Layfon deliberately choose a distant Academy City?)

She thought so. So he chose this place because it didn't have as many people from Grendan? She didn't understand, but this hypothesis felt close to the truth. For him who was hiding a secret, he wouldn't have wanted people near him to know it. So he purposefully picked a distant place.

If so.....

"Um....."

"What is it?" the senpai turned around, as Naruki had been deep in thought and had lagged behind.

"No. Nothing," Naruki shook her head and ran to catch up with her.

(No problem at all.)

If so.....was there an issue with Layfon? No. Not at all.

As long as a person lived, he had to have experienced a sad or embarrassing past that he wanted to wipe clean. There was nothing wrong with escaping the place where he kept recalling his bad memories.

(Ah, but that depends on the situation.)

The person she was worried about wasn't Layfon, but Meishen. Obviously, Meishen liked him. The closer she got to him, the greater the possibility she'd come into contact with the truth he was hiding. No, maybe she had already touched it. If the two were

to be together...Naruki didn't want them to develop a distant relationship of being afraid to touch the other's wound.

What would Meishen do?

(If it's her.....)

No problem. Sure, but Naruki couldn't think like that.

(Perhaps she'll be depressed.)

This was worrying.

Since they were young, Meishen had always hidden behind Naruki, the tallest of the three, who knew how to fight. Nobody messed with Mifi. Mifi liked to use the fastest means possible to grab hold of the other person's secret and use it against them in the most diabolical way possible.

Meishen grew up being protected by them.

But she wasn't just being protected.

Both Naruki and Mifi fell under the charm of Meishen's sweets. They wouldn't dare lift their heads before her. If they went over the line, Meishen wouldn't make any sweets for them. But even so, Meishen rarely left their small circle to make contact with the outside world. Her assertive action of working in the coffee shop was a great improvement. However, this wasn't enough to build a relationship with someone outside their circle.

Naruki was really worried.

(Um, what should I do? Maybe I should force the truth out of Layfon? Meishen might really fall into despair if it's a hard truth. What should I do? He's weak in personality. Perhaps it's better to use my authority as a City Policewoman? Just make up some evidence to threaten him and arrest him?)

Deep in thought, Naruki had been walking slowly. The senpai strolling ahead of her turned back to look...

And at the same time.....

"Whhaaa....." She lost her balance and fell onto the grass.

The ground was shaking.

"What is it?"

The intensity of the tremor made Naruki kneel down. The trees lining the road and the buildings around them clamoured. The streetlights shook violently, as if they could fall down at any moment. The light jumped.

"Wh wh wh- what's happening?"

Senpai grabbed hold of one of the streetlights. It seemed to be her first time experiencing a cityquake.

"This is a city-quake. The cause could be uneven ground or the city not having a firm foothold....."

"Oh? .....I see." It took a while for Senpai to understand her.

It was easy to forget this fact while living a normal life in the city. Zuellni was moving continuously.

When Naruki was very young, a city-quake of a greater magnitude than this had occurred in her city because Joeldem was trapped in ground with a weak crust. The city-quake had caused huge damage.

When the shaking gradually eased, Naruki stood up. It didn't look like there was a fire anywhere. She couldn't hear the racket from the residential district as it was a bit far from here, but things must be chaotic over there.

She thought of Mifi and Meishen. They should be sleeping in the dormitory.

"I hope there aren't any accidents."

And the shrill call of the siren dashed her hope.

She was in a bad mood since yesterday because Layfon had hidden his true strength.....

They were cleaning and painting the tubes to prevent the spread of rust in the Central Mechanism Chamber.

Holding the paint can and the brush, Layfon focused entirely on the sound of the moving gears behind his back.

Nina was silently cleaning a tube.

To Layfon, the sound of her brush against the tube was scolding him.

"Ah."

Nina didn't react to the sound he tried to suppress. Layfon's stomach hurt.

(What did I do wrong?)

He thought of the possible reason.

Nina had been acting strange since yesterday's celebration party . Putting Felli aside, who was absent, both Sharnid and Harley greeted him. Nina was the only one who didn't look like she wanted to talk to him. All she said was "Thanks" and then she had gone to sit by herself.

She must be angry at his hiding of his true strength.

This had to be the only reason. Even he could understand her unease. Someone with a lukewarm attitude actually exceeded her in her best area. It was like he was mocking her hard-won accomplishments.

"Excuse me....." he called to her. Her brushing movement stopped.

"What?" she said without looking at him.

"Are you angry?" he blurted out.

(I'm an idiot!)

He could have said something better.

".....No."

He thought she'd roar at him, but all she did was deny in a low voice.

"There's no reason to be mad, but....." she sighed, lowered her shoulders and turned around.

Her gaze didn't directly touch his.

"I regret letting you enter the platoon."

"Huh?"

"I was deceived by the Student President. I was satisfied to have you since the platoon match was close and we still lacked members. You took my Kei directly, so I thought if you trained well, you could become an attacker in the platoon. Even if we lost the match, you could become stronger somehow, before the real Military Arts Competition."

"But your real strength is way beyond my calculations."

"No....."

"Was the Student President lying when he said you were a successor of a Heaven's Blade?"

Looking embarrassed suddenly, Nina moved her gaze further away from him.

"Did he tell you?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"He told me what he knew, and all I can do is pray it's not true."

Her eyes, questioning him and wishing for something, made him release the breath he was holding. He felt debilitated, as if a certain tension was suddenly cut away, the weight of his body disappearing into thin air.....the emotion of despair.

(It's all over.....)

Just what had ended? What he had left behind in Grendan had returned to him. What he had been running away from had finally caught up with him.

"Tell me it's all a lie," she pleaded.

But she didn't think the Student President had lied to her.

Wolfstein.....from the moment he learned of the twelve Heaven's Blade successors.

Everyone had been scolding him, saying it was wrong, yet nobody had taken care to explain just how wrong it was. All they did was scold him.

His stiff expression relaxed.

Yes, his old self had returned.

Nina's face turned frosty. She must have obtained her confirmation from his look.

"Was it true?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"I participated in underground matches in Grendan, tainting the reputation of the Heaven's Blade and was exiled."

He watched with indifference as the muscles on her face twitched.

"Why?"

"To earn money."

He trained in Military Arts for that purpose and won again and again.

But the prize money from normal matches was too little.

As a result of unbroken victories, he had become a successor of a Heaven's Blade to serve under the Queen of Grendan, Alsheyra. But his salary was still too small and the special scholarship he obtained was still too little.

"I needed a lot of money for the many children in the orphanage ."

The money he had was enough for himself or just a normal family.

But there were too many orphans. The money he earned wasn't enough to provide for their education and living. His Master wasn't the only one managing an orphanage. Layfon needed money to give to his comrades, for all the numerous orphans in Grendan.....and what he was earning wasn't enough.

He could have just earned enough for the orphanage he lived in , but he felt he needed to provide for all the orphanages. He didn't know why either. Perhaps, all the orphans were his comrades.

So he wasn't earning enough.

"And at that time, I found out about the underground matches."

Nina's expression swayed.

She probably thought what he did had tainted the Military Arts. Many people thought of Military Arts as a sacred art to defend a city from outside enemies. This viewpoint was especially strong in those who lived as professional Military Artists.

The sacred art must not be tainted by human desires.

But in reverse, because it was sacred, people wanted to taint it. The students gambling secretly on the platoon matches were immersed in the festival-like atmosphere committing their illegal act.

But compared to the students, there were people who wanted to do such things with clear-cut intent. Perhaps they weren't satisfied with the normal matches that began and ended ceremoniously in the spirit of sports. What they lusted after were the mad and bloody fights.

And for this reason, the underground matches offered huge prize money.

Layfon had found out about it. He contacted the people who organized such matches. Using the threat that came from the authority of a Heaven's Blade successor, he suggested that they could advertise his unbelievably strong power. It was easy to tell who would have won in a normal match, but it was another matter to watch a Heaven's Blade successor fight without holding back.

He used his Kei as if he was in a show, and through that, obtained money from the audience.

"But I couldn't keep that up for long."

It was difficult to shut people's mouths. The rumor of his deeds spread widely in Grendan and eventually reached Queen Alsheyra's ear.

"And so I was exiled."

"Of course," Nina said, as if to let out all the anger and irritation inside her.

Nina's outrage was the same as the people's at Grendan, including Layfon's Master, the other Heaven's Blade successors and even his comrades – the orphans.

Even so, he still didn't understand.

"Why are you so certain?"

"What? You....."

"Kei is an important treasure for humanity, striving to survive in this world. Because of it, the orphans and I didn't have to worry about food. Why must people make using it a crime?"

He truly couldn't comprehend.

"The Queen exiled me because a certain Military Artist was threatening me."

"Threatening.....?"

She probably didn't know about this.

"That person wanted to participate in a Heaven's Blade match. He showed me proof of my fights in the underground matches and threatened to spread it around unless I lost to him purposefully and let him have the Heaven's Blade."

There were twelve Heaven's Blade successors. The only way to get that title was to either defeat a successor in a Heaven's Blade match or win the numerous matches after the death of a successor.

The blackmailer had another way than Military Arts to win a match, and he used it to threaten Layfon. But Layfon didn't accept the deal. He couldn't abandon his title as it was his key to the underground matches, to fight as a Heaven's Blade successor.

So he tried to kill the other person. His secret would be safe if this person died.

He planned to win with one strike. He had that confidence. Once his opponent got careless, Layfon would deal a fatal strike and finish him off.

But, he failed.

His one strike only managed to sever his opponent's arm, and the match ended as his opponent was unable to keep fighting.

And then the news of Layfon's deed in the underground matches spread.

"I don't find him despicable," he said to the speechless Nina.

"He was only doing everything he could to obtain what he desired. But he got careless in the end. That's all there was to it."

To Layfon, the way he finished his opponent was naive. One must fight desperately to survive, but the level of desperation he showed in his method was meaningless. At that time, there were still things driving him to act that way solely for the purpose of survival. And as such, he wasn't angry with the Student President. Karian's attitude of manipulating things and people to ensure Zuellni's survival was the same as Layfon's.

But Karian's concern on what Layfon had abandoned made him revisit the feeling he had in Grendan all over again.

"And that is who I am. Do you find me despicable?"

Everyone in Grendan reproved him for being base.

Was Nina the same? He waited for her reaction with a neutral expression.

He felt pain as of his heart being torn apart. The pain was an illusion, but he had no way of shaking it off, so he could only suffer it.

Why was he feeling this kind of pain?

No. He had already experienced it before – the punishment that Queen Alsheyra had passed down to him. All the Heaven's Blade successors served her, so Layfon could only surrender to her judgment.

All the Heaven's Blade successors, officials and his Master watched him as his punishment was dealt out. Their gazes were cold and icy.

The pain jolted him back to reality.

"You.....are despicable," she said.

And then the ground shook violently.

Chapter 6: On the polluted earth

"It" had been living inside the earth for a long time. Without moving, only ingesting pollutants from within the soiled earth, for a long time.

Maybe "It" didn't even have a sense of time; living beneath the surface without ever feeling discomfort, moving slightly between sleeping and waking to eat soil. Time was wasted away in slumber .

However, the time to awaken was approaching. Since "It" was already a Mature Form, it could survive by consuming pollutants. But it's offspring were different. Since the larvae were intolerant to pollution, they couldn't digest it.

That's why they needed unpolluted nutrition.

In order to thrive, it could no longer sleep.

With the cracking of the earth, the signal to awaken rang.

The sound of grinding pipes echoed all over the place. The violent shaking of the floor caused Nina to lose her balance, but Layfon caught her by the arm.

For a moment, there was a sparkle on her face. Feeling that he just did something which shouldn't be done, Layfon thought of letting go of her arm. However after reconsidering it instantly, he slowly stopped.

"What...is this...?"

To overcome the sound of metallic screeching all over the place, Nina raised her voice. Otherwise, her voice wouldn't be heard by Layfon, who was standing next to her.

"It's a city-quake."

Layfon also raised his voice.

"This is..... a city-quake?"

Looks like this is the first time Nina has experienced such a thing. Layfon thought, as she looked at her surroundings with a confused face.

"At first it was shaking up and down; maybe the city took a misstep into a ravine....."

Layfon carefully checked the pattern of the shaking. At first it was shaking vertically, and then it was shaking diagonally. The

bucket and brushes that were near their feet were now sliding freely along the floor.

If it took a bad step, maybe it's sliding into some kind of hole? If so, then this was the worst possible situation. A city which cannot move is perfect prey for filth monsters.

Nina, who was momentarily overwhelmed by the shaking, quickly recovered herself and shouted, "There should be an emergency call! We have to return, quickly!"

"But the floor is unstable! We can't move around yet!"

"Even so, we still have to go back!"

Nina shook off Layfon's hand and stood up, Kei running through her body. Using Internal-type Kei to enhance body movement, Nina ran between the gaps of the pipes, as if weaving them together like a needle.

"Ah, to hell with it!"

Also using Internal-type Kei, Layfon chased after Nina. Even faster then Nina, Layfon quickly moved forward, as if he was half-flying.

In front of him, Nina was running through a passageway suspended in mid-air.

"She's too reckless."

Although that was the shortest route to go to the surface, it was a risky action. At that moment, the passage was swinging left and right, as if it could collapse at any moment. As such, it wouldn't be strange if Nina, who was running with all her strength, suddenly got thrown out from the passage.

There wasn't time to use the stairs. Layfon leaped upwards, using the pipes around him as footholds. Beneath the corridor was the heart of the machinery, where the Electronic Fairy lived. While chasing after Nina, he caught Zuellni at the edge of his vision, an existence pulsating with dim light. In the form of a child, Zuellni was gazing at the deep earth with a terrified expression. She was curled up, as if she was too scared and was trying to hide somewhere narrow.

As if she was peeking at some terrifying existence and hoping it wouldn't surface.....And Layfon got his confirmation.

"Oh, no!"

Muttering, he jumped off the last pipe to land on the corridor.

"Wait up!"

Just as Nina was about to run past him, he grabbed hold of her wrist again.

"Let go! There's no time to spare!"

"Yes! No time!" Layfon said, his anger matching hers.

Even the bold Nina paused, caught by his aura. She stared at him with wide eyes as he shouted.

"This is an emergency. We don't have time to laze around. If we don't escape....."

"What did you say?"

"Hurry up and head for a shelter. We need every single second we have."

"Just what are you talking about?" she questioned. Irritation and annoyance filled him at her reaction.

(How could she be used to such peace!?)

He just wanted to shout out in lamentation, but Nina still didn't know anything. If this was Grendan, anyone would have known what Layfon's expression was about. But this wasn't the case in Zuellni. Perhaps the other students here were the same. Just how many people knew the real situation? The more he thought of it, the more irritated he became.

"Layfon!?" Nina's angry voice called him back to reality.

He slowly let out his breath and tried to speak in a way that would affect every corner of Nina's body.

A simple and absolute message.

"The filth monsters are here."

The siren rang. Informed of the situation through the phone in his dormitory, Karian immediately left and went to the school building.

His destination wasn't the Student President's office. He entered a conference room in the middle floor of a tower that was surrounded by the Military Arts buildings. The few students in the room turned their gazes on him, including Vance.

"Situation?"

A thin, tall male student replied to Karian's short question. " One-third of Zuellni's legs are trapped in the ground, unable to escape." His pale skin looked green.

"Escape?"

"Yeah.....It should be able to move on its own under normal circumstances, but now.....Well, the legs are stuck."

Karian addressed Vance. "How's the evacuation going?"

"The City Police are evacuating the students, but it's too chaotic; they don't have the situation under control yet."

Vance shook his head with a scowl. Karian nodded to comfort him.

"That can't be helped. We don't have enough people here with real fighting experience. But I hope you can speed up the evacuation as much as possible."

Next he turned to the representative of the Alchemy course.

"Release the safety setting of all the Dites of Military Arts students, and please hurry and activate the city's defense system."

"We're already on it."

"Gather all the platoons. We must fight with them as the core."

Karian once again looked at Vance, who nodded but voiced a question with a stiff face. "Do you think we can do this?"

Everyone looked at Karian.

The problem of an Academy City was that it lacked experienced fighters. Everyone in it was a student. There were no adults in any of the grades, from seniors down to freshmen. These factors caused the greatest pressure and doubt in its citizens.

Could they pass this crisis safely?

"Only a dead end awaits us if we don't do this. Not only will the Military Arts students die, but everyone in Zuellni," Karian concluded.

Everyone in the room was holding his breath. Once again, they understood the situation they were in. Under the shadow of death, no one wanted to say "Let's run away".

Even if they ran out of the city, they still couldn't survive on the polluted earth.

"We have to live no matter what. This is for everyone's - no, also for our own future. Please understand this fact and act accordingly ."

Everyone nodded at Karian's icy resolution.

"......The filth monsters?" Nina said after pausing for half a second. She had taken some time to digest his meaning. This told Layfon how serious her lack of experience was in regards to the danger around them.

"How could that happen?! The city should be moving and avoiding the filth monsters. This can't be happening....."

"A city can only avoid the filth monsters on the earth, and even then there are limits. What Zuellni encountered this time is likely a mature mother-form sleeping beneath the ground." He told her his hypothesis.

The female filth monsters had eggs inside their bodies. The mother hibernated until the eggs mature into a larval stage. The young ones that just hatched could not absorb the pollutants, so the mother would provide them clean nutrients she had stored in her body during her hibernation. If this still wasn't enough food, the babies would devour each other. The mother would choose a few of the leftover ones and care for them till they fully matured.

And if even that wasn't enough, the mother would become food for her young.

The instinct of filth monsters to reproduce and care for the next generation was this strong.

"The mother won't become food if there isn't a need for it."

If there was a close enough food source.....

"What....."

Now Nina understood what Layfon was saying.

The people of Zuellni would become food. Nina's hand trembled.

Was it fear? But, if so.....

Without understanding, Layfon continued to speak.

"So please head for the shelter....."

"Stop it!"

Her reaction hit him on the face.

"You're telling me to evacuate!? You're telling me to run away!? Do you think I could do that!?"

He looked at her, lost. The light of Kei enveloped her, a symbol of her fighting spirit. He held his breath at the Kei that was more intense and beautiful than the Kei she had exhibited during the platoon match.

She was too naive.

"What is our power for? What is the purpose of this power within us!? Isn't it for times like this!? Not for fights between people, but for our survival! Do you think we are allowed to run away at a time like this!? Stop joking!"

He knew why she was trembling. It wasn't fear, but the drumming of the heart waving away that fear. Her honest and determined heart had overcome her horror. This was the drumming eliminating her fear.

And that was why it was so bright.

Layfon squinted at that brightness.

He never thought a person's Kei could be this bright. He knew of someone whose Kei light was more intense than Nina's, and someone whose Kei was fiercer. But he knew of no one whose Kei was the same as Nina's right here, exuding this level of light.

".....You really are despicable," she said in a low voice, suppressing her violent emotion. "You have great power. Why don't you use it for something useful?"

Her eyelids lowered.

"I don't know the terror of having nothing to eat. I don't get it, so I can't fully understand your standpoint with money. But even so, there must be something else that's worth pursuing, right? You don't need to use dirty means that taint your strength and station. From your viewpoint, it isn't wrong to purely chase after money. But for someone strong like you, shouldn't you be able to do something greater than what I can do? Won't you be able to save many things? If the comrades you want to save are proud of you, then aren't you also saving their hearts?"

Her words stabbed him like a knife.

The eyes of his comrades at the orphanage when he became a Heaven's Blade successor.

Their eyes when he lost his right to the title of "Heaven's Blade."

Their sudden change in attitude convinced Layfon that no one understood him.

He had been betrayed.

But could they have been the ones who felt they had been betrayed?

"I'm going."

"Wait."

(Even if you go, you.....)

He swallowed the other half of his words.

(You can't possibly win.)

He was dizzied by Nina's Kei, but this Kei was just a symbol of her inner heart. A strong heart was no indication of increasing strength.

So what would happen if he said that?

"If we don't fight now, when do we fight?"

The words she left behind indicated her determination to fight. Besides, what if he stopped her? It was natural for Military Artists to fight against filth monsters – it was their mission, given to them from heaven – the duty of those given Kei and Psychokinesis. All of them would think like that.

If they don't fight, who would?

If it was me.....

Layfon was no longer a Military Artist. Even though he possessed Kei, he was no longer duty-bound as he had given up the standpoint of a Military Artist.

He didn't want to fight for the sake of others.

He made many wrong decisions in Grendan. The attitude of the people around him was a great shock to him.

"Who's fighting for others....."

Having chased after Nina, he was now back on the surface. He strolled towards the dormitory, listening to the sirens and the commotion of people evacuating.

"I don't have a goal anymore to fight for" he repeated again and again, as if chanting a spell.

The dormitory was empty. Of course, everyone had evacuated. The silence made him uneasy. He knew he had come to a place that he shouldn't have, but he had no idea where else he could go. He headed straight for his room.

Layfon changed into his Military Arts uniform. The fact that the weapon hanging from his harness calmed his heart mocked him. But since he didn't go to a shelter, he let himself keep it for self-defense. Even if it wasn't for others, he had to fight for his own life.

The weight of the Dite had wiped clean his uneasy feeling, but this only made him feel restless about what he was doing. The dormitory was empty, and he was in here, doing nothing.

The strange feeling that he wasn't on the field fighting filth monsters.

"Fighting them has become a habit," he said, mocking his own wound. Back in Grendan, he could make extra money by killing filth monsters, so he was always at the front, standing alone upon the battlefield. For some reason, there were always lots of filth monsters in Grendan's way. The number of fights that Grendan had had, could not be compared to other cities.

And that could be why Grendan was called the birthplace of Military Arts.

But this didn't matter anymore.

"I don't want to fight for others anymore....."

Then he noticed something behind the door.

"!"

He picked it up, not knowing what it was.

"A letter....."

It was an envelope that was bigger than the size of his palm. Its crumpled corners were proof of its long journey. On its back was an address of Grendan and a nostalgic name.

"Leerin....."

The dorm security must have stuffed the letter through the crack of the door. It must have arrived while Layfon was at the school.

He let go of the unimportant speculation and cautiously opened the letter.

His eyes widened at the first line, which completely shattered his lie.

Don't lie!

I'm very angry. Layfon, why are you lying? Oh, and this is my reply to your second letter. Your first letter was somehow sent to me together with the second letter. Don't blame me. I wasn't lazy in replying. But please, at least remember my address.

Anyway, I'm angry. It's impossible for you to become good friends with people so quickly, and live a normal academy life like ordinary people . Please don't underestimate me.

"So mean....." He sat back on the floor. Her evaluation of his terrible social skill...So that was how he appeared in her eyes.....

He continued reading in spite of that setback. Leerin had been the closest to him in the orphanage and she was one of the few who still talked to him after what had happened. He couldn't ignore her words.

As he read, a feeling stirred inside him. The stirring intensified, striking him hard from the inside. He couldn't sit still anymore. He read as he stood up, unable to suppress the urge inside him.

As he finished reading, he shoved the door aside and rushed through the corridor.

He ran. He ran heedlessly and recklessly.

As he ran, he stuffed the letter into his pocket, reflecting on its contents.

I understand your desire to forget your past in Grendan. If it was me, even I'd want to run away and forget everyone's cold gazes.

But you don't really want to forget everything, do you? You're still sending letters to Grendan, to stay in contact with me. If you truly wanted to seal off your past in the depths of your mind, then I should also be forgotten.

I always watched you train, watched you grow strong. Back then, I never thought 'that person doesn't want to train in the Military Arts.' That stance of yours when you were waving your longsword with the whole of your heart, training in the dojo, was dazzling to me.

I also want it; the thing that can propel me forward with all my strength.

Layfon, you're the hero of the orphans in Grendan. Everyone finds you dazzling, and that isn't a lie. You, who knelt before the Queen, felt so distant, even for me. It was a lonely feeling, but it gave us hope, that we could also make something ourselves. We grew up under the same circumstances. If you could give off such heat, then we could also be successful.

It was all because of you that I chose to study instead of work.

I want to study management. The Head of the orphanage has also changed his thinking because of you. He regrets that you became like that because of him. He said he'll pay more attention and be wiser when spending money.

Our father is so useless. But whether it's the past or the present, he's caring for us in his own way. If it wasn't for him, you and I wouldn't have met.

And you've changed him.

I've decided to help father. I want to study management and build an orphanage not plagued by money issues.

I want to protect our orphanage, just like father.

It'd be good if Layfon could protect the orphanage, when we live together in Grendan once again. Do I sound stupid? Like returning to the past but with some advancement. Can't we change ourselves like this and go back to what it was like before?

I pray for the day when you once again step on the soil of Grendan.

To my dear Layfon Wolfstein Alseif.

Leerin Marfes.

The sound of heavy movement pierced the atmosphere, as if the entire world was twisting into another form.

A number of Zuellni's legs were stuck in the ground. The metallic sound of the joints of Zuellni's legs struggling to move filled the air.

And the other noise was.....

**Gacha, gacha, gacha,

This was the larva of a filth monster.

Driven by their instinct to eat, all the larvae turned their eyes to the light shooting down from above.

Where the food was.

The earth cried out. It was their mother's voice.

Hurry and eat. What can keep you alive is over there.

Eat.

Slaughter.

Drink.

And become strong, strong, strong.....

The larvae stirred. They didn't even yet know how to move their bodies, but they obeyed their mother and tried. Irritation grew from their unfamiliarity with their bodies, but, driven by their appetite, they bore it and learned, moving as their mother's voice directed them to.

The shell above the body split in two.

And beneath it was something half-transparent; it was filled with something that looked like crumpled paper. As the larvae shook, the crumpled paper that was wet with moisture pushed and spread out to become wings.

And, a new noise dominated the scene.

**Buzzz

The sea of red and black swept towards Nina's position, the noise of beating wings loud enough to shatter her eardrums.

"Artillery, commence firing!" she shouted into her transmitter.

The artillerymen, led by Sharnid, fed their Kei into the cannons on the outskirts of the city.

They fired.

The condensed Kei hit the larvae's front-lines and detonated. Red sparks exploded everywhere. Shells shattered and small legs fell, scattered onto the ground.

The surviving larvae landed, folded their wings and stored them underneath their shells.

"They can't fly for extended periods. Sharnid, target those that fly. Don't let any reach the city."

"Roger. I can't die here. I still have a date tomorrow."

Usually, she would have been irritated by his joke, but this time his laughter made her smile. She relaxed, and Restored the two Dites she took out from her harness. The Kei flowing through the iron whips with their safety locks released looked more vivid and clearer than usual.

Out of the 17th platoon, only Nina and Sharnid were here. Layfon was useless, and Felli had not heeded the call of the Student President. Nina heard that the Psychokinesist had not been spotted at the shelter.

Then where was she.....?

There wasn't time to ponder this question.

Before Nina were numerous larvae.

The larva's head, which looked tiny compared to its body. Below the flashing red compound eye, a small orifice opened to extend a jaw, in which four sharp teeth were stirring.

"How could we be eaten by these things! Attack!"

Nina bellowed and rushed towards the larvae.

Harley's eyes widened.

"Why are you here?"

Not far from the front-line at the city's edge was a temporary tent. Students from Medicine and Alchemy waited inside it.

The sound of the larvae could be heard here.

The medical students checked their medicine with stiff faces. The alchemy students also had the same expression as they prepared the Dites.

The machine Harley had been using to release the safety locks on the Dites was now cooling down, and standing before him was Layfon, who appeared to be breathless from running.

"Great, you're here....." Layfon relaxed his breathing and removed the Dite from his harness.

"Huh? Is the safety lock still on?"

"Yes, but I have to ask another favor....."

Harley quickly set to unlocking it. "A favor?"

"Can you make two settings?"

"Two?"

He widened his eyes.

"Yes, two."

Harley looked back and forth between the Dite and the machine . The Dites with the safety locks were the same type as the machine that made the setting, so he could adjust the settings here too. Because if that couldn't be done, students whose Dites were damaged wouldn't be able to fight. Many spare Dites had been prepared here, and many more were coming in.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes. It's not difficult to adjust the settings, but.....Can you use it ?"

It was natural to have doubts. He had never heard of a Dite having two settings. It wasn't impossible on a technical level, but it was harder for the wielder.

One had to use a keyword and his Kei to Restore a Dite. The Dite would Restore into its adjusted form according to the wielder's voice and his Kei. The quality of a Dite could be adjusted to suit anyone's Kei. As long as a setting remained the same, only the Dite's original owner could use it.

The problem was the Dite's adaptation to Kei. To make two settings meant there had to be two keywords.

But a person couldn't make two types of Kei. The attributes of Kei differed from person to person. It wasn't impossible, but it was rare for a person to have two types of Kei flow.

"Can you use two different Kei?"

"No, but that won't be a problem. All you need to do is enter the exact value of the Kei output."

"And that's the hard part."

"I can do it. Please make the setting."

"But there's no time to make adjustments. And if you really want to, you can use two Dites....."

That was reasonable enough a suggestion, but Layfon shook his head. "I want to experience it the way I did in the past. Please."

Harley sighed. He inserted the terminal into the Dite. A number came up on the display.

"What's the setting I have to enter?"

Layfon told him the number and Harley entered it on the keyboard.

His fingers stopped.

"Uh?"

The detailed number caused him to widen his eyes for the third time.

"Can you really do this?"

"Yes," Layfon answered without hesitation.

Harley cautiously entered the detailed number once again, so accurate that it made him dizzy.

"And do you know where Loss-senpai is?"

"What? The Student President?"

"No, our senpai."

"Aah.....Isn't she with Nina?"

"No. Well, I'm not sure, but I don't think she's there."

Felli wouldn't be there. She hates being used.

(Where is she? This won't work well without her help.)

Perhaps she was somewhere nearby. He looked around but couldn't see her.

While he was doing that, Harley finished the adjustments.

".....Will we survive?" Harley said as he handed over the Dite. He looked at the floor, patting his gear.

"We easily forget that we live in a harsh world. I was very scared when I came here on the roaming bus. We were extremely uneasy without any equipment. I was relieved when we safely arrived at the school. I once saw a city destroyed by the filth monsters. A city called Blitzen. I didn't know what that city was

like. I was scared, thinking that the fate of Blitzen might befall us one day."

"Nina looked regretful. I think at that time, she realized how useless she was."

"But after arriving at this city, I forgot about it. Forgetting...It's more like I didn't believe that would happen to us. The greatness of a mobile city.....But it isn't perfect. And that imperfection is now before us....."

The filth monsters were attacking Zuellni.

"Will we survive? Nina, everyone, me, and you....."

"Of course," Layfon nodded. Harley lifted his face. Layfon nodded again to wipe away the doubt on the other's face.

"I'll definitely protect this place."

Layfon began to run again just after saying that.

"Where are you going?" Harley called.

"To someplace high!"

The highest place in Zuellni.....Was the command tower next to the Student President's dormitory.

He headed for it.

There was some distance between the outskirts of the city and the Student President's dormitory. He could have ridden a tram, but its route wouldn't have taken him directly to the place he wanted. Instead, he used Internal-type Kei and flew along the rooftops to his destination.

And landed in front of the dormitory.

Intending to head for the tower, he saw a girl standing at the entrance.

"Senpai....."

It was Felli.

She stood there, lonely and without purpose. She wasn't surprised to see Layfon. Her lips trembled lightly.

"Senpai, why are you here?"

"No reason....."

He could guess what was happening, looking at her lowered gaze. Perhaps she was overcome. He studied her closely and saw her cheeks were slightly pink.

"Does it have something to do with the Student President?"

"It's unrelated."

She turned to leave, and he quickly grabbed her delicate wrist.

"......What is the meaning of this?"

Her eyes narrowed. He hadn't the time to shrink under that gaze.

"I need your help."

A shiver ran through her body.

"What do you want?" She shook off his hand, her glare sharper than ever.

"Do you so want me to use Psychokinesis? I don't want it. Isn't it fine to not use it? I don't need this ability. I hate it enough to toss it to someone else. Do you still want me to use it?" Her voice was calm, but every single word was reproving him.

"I thought you were the same as me. You didn't want to use your power, but I was wrong. You....."

"I also don't want this power."

Layfon talked, seizing his chance to speak without interruption.

"I'm only using what I possess. Perhaps I've never liked this ability."

But Leerin didn't think so. He thought he was only using it to reach his goal, but perhaps deep down inside, he truly liked wielding the katana. He couldn't be sure. It was already in the past , and he didn't feel that he liked Military Arts in the present. In

reality, he had such painful memories because of the Arts of the Katana.

Even if he had used it wrongly.

"Besides this, the current situation needs us. This can't be helped."

Displeasure showed in Felli's eyes.

He said solemnly, "I don't want anyone to fall victim. I want to eliminate every single filth monster, and I need senpai's power to achieve that. I need your help. Please!"

He bowed. Looking at her feet, he had no idea how she would react. Her feet remained still, and Layfon kept silent.

"......Even I know this isn't the time to be willful," she said. "But I still don't like being used. I hate it."

"If you don't use your power, people will die," he said still bowing his head. "I also want to find a future without Military Arts in this city, but for that purpose, this city must live. I've already failed once in my life. I don't want to fail again."

(And also.....)

"And also, I don't want the people here to lose their futures because of today."

Mifi, Naruki and Meishen were here. Their dazzling lives made him dizzy. He didn't want their futures to be dashed.

He only fought for his survival back in Grendan, but that wasn't enough. The world of Regios allowed people to live with dreams. The Electronic Fairy, the little girl Zuellni protected them and gave them the chance to have dreams. In that case, this time, let him fight seriously for his goal.

To keep on living and fighting for the satisfaction of living.

And for that purpose, he would not allow Meishen and her friends to meet a tragic end. They gave off so much light and allowed him to look forward to a dream.

".....You really are a good person, beyond help."

He heard her sigh.

And then Layfon looked up after hearing the sound that followed.

In Felli's hand was a Restored staff.

"What do I have to do?" she asked lightly.

Layfon bowed to Felli again.

Her face reddening, she turned away from him.

Droplets of sweat rolled down from her forehead and wet her eyebrows. Nina wiped it away with her sleeve to prevent it from seeping into her eyes. Absorbing the sweat, her sleeves turned heavy. Impatience sent Kei flowing through her entire body, and the Kei blew off some of the sweat sticking on her. With her iron whips, Nina kept striking the larvae that had lost their legs and couldn't move.

"Tsk!" she called out at the result of her attack.

Internal-type Kei strengthened her body and she struck the larva with the force of External-type burst Kei, and all that did was make a small dent on its shell.

"Damn, just how hard is this thing?"

She retrieved the iron whips and jumped aside. Another larva landed in the spot she was in just a moment before.

The number of larvae showed no sign of decreasing.

The larvae that were hit by Sharnid's team crashed down onto the ground, and instead of flying once more, dragged their bodies towards Nina and her platoons. The students had been attacking these larvae for a long while now.

It felt like a long while.

Nina couldn't tell just how much time had passed. Usually, she had no problem measuring time with her biological clock, but that failed her today.

"Damn!" She knew she was tense because of her inexperience. She would have gotten used to the fight soon enough if her opponent was human.

But not to these larvae. None of the students had fought any non-human targets in mock training.

Nina attacked the larva beside her with Kei, managing to destroy a compound eye and tear open the red veined muscles. The larva continued to sway forward and then stopped, blocked by a fence. The high voltage electricity flowing through the fence lit up the larva in green light. The larva ceased struggling, as black smoke rushed out from beneath its shell.

Perspiration dotted Nina's forehead.

Fortunately, the movements of the larvae were clumsy and repetitive. All the larvae did was move in a straight line. If they didn't fall flat on their opponents, pressing down hard, they couldn't use their jaws.

What Nina had to look out for was the horn that extended out from beneath the shell. All of the Military Arts students were working hard to incapacitate the larvae, aiming for the shell.

But without much of a success.

The problem was obviously the huge number of enemies they were facing.

"This never ends....."

Sharnid's team kept hitting the flying larvae as Nina's troops continued to eliminate the larvae that had landed. They kept repeating this strategy, but the combination of air and land combat was nothing compared to the larvae's advantage in number. The larvae had the absolute upper-hand in this fight.

"Ha!"

The shouts diverted Nina's attention away to where three Military Arts students were fighting against one larva.

"Ah....."

Nina watched, forgetting the fact that everyone else was also fighting.

The three fought with a female student as the center. The color of that female student harness showed that she was in first year. She was a tall and awe-inspiring looking female. A badge of the City Police was on her baton. This explained why she was on the battlefield, even though she had not yet obtained an arms permit.

A speedy rush took the female student to the side of the larva, and she kicked out at one of the joints in the leg. It looked like she hadn't yet trained in External-type burst Kei, but the Internal-type Kei sustaining her was amazing.

The larva howled in pain and changed its direction, charging towards its attacker.

The girl retreated back while increasing her distance with it.

And while that happened, the other two students struck the larva with their Kei, causing a crack to appear on its shell.

The larva wanted to again change its direction, but the girl kept on distracting it.

Their repeated strategy had destroyed one larva after another. A number of larva corpses lay strewn in their vicinity.

What a brilliant plan, to fight three against one.

But what attracted Nina's attention was the girl who acted as bait. Her movements were deft and skillful.

"I've seen her somewhere," Nina muttered.

She had no time to dig further into her memory, as another larva approached her. Nina would learn later that the girl was called Naruki Gelni.

A small mountain had piled up at the edge of the city, made of the larvae that Sharnid's team had hit with their cannons. As the larvae couldn't reform their attacks, they had given Nina and her troops a chance to keep on fighting.

The shooting team took out that mountain of larvae. The larvae scattered to fall onto the ground.

A larva suddenly came close and Nina bent down to avoid its horn, flicking out her whips to strike at its head. She rolled back, narrowly escaping the fate of being trampled by other larvae, but a larva was already waiting at the spot where she would roll to a stop. The tension and pressure in her head made her act reflexively . Her External Kei burst out, and using that momentum, she widened the gap between her and the larva.

She regained her fighting stance and entered the fight once more. As a shell covered the larva's body, the larva's head was the easiest target. Nina's strike was off by a few millimeters, and her whips broke one of the larva's forelegs. The larva shifted its movement, and headed left.

What a close call.

She relaxed a little.

"Captain!"

Whose angry voice was this that came through her transmitter? Sharnid?

Without the time to determine who the owner of that voice was, she instinctively leaped to a side. A presence kept closing in from behind, and pain flared in Nina's shoulder. Her body flipped through the air.

She crashed onto the ground, the things in her vision spinning. Her wound brushed against the earth. Bearing that intense pain, she stood up.

The wound was on her left shoulder. Muscles had been torn apart from her shoulder and arm. The iron whip fell from her numb hand. The larva that rushed past her had crashed into another student. Blood and pain gushed out from Nina's wound, staining her tattered sleeve scarlet, and her wrist turned numb.

(No!)

The loss of blood took away the vitality of her Kei. Her body felt heavy.

(No, this isn't good.....)

Anxiety halted her steps and made the iron whip heavy in her right hand. The spasms running through her left fingers irritated her.

Her consciousness was starting to fade. No. She must move..... Despite her thought, her knees refused her order and could only tremble. The exhaustion that she couldn't feel thanks to her Kei now overwhelmed her.

She stared off blankly, her consciousness slipping. She stared, and failed to move her body. In her vision was a larva, its huge body turning, its polished black horn targeting her.

The vibration in the air hit her first.

(I'm about to die.....)

She accepted her impending fate as the vibration pierced through her body. This didn't feel like the Kei from the cannons, but from a normal Dite, and it rained madly down on the larvae. Who was it? Sharnid? The rain of Kei successfully destroyed many larvae's heads, but it wasn't enough to eliminate every single filth monster.

Even the iron whip in Nina's right hand fell to the ground. She watched the larva head towards her. She'll die. She'll die. Facing this reality, she could only watch it happen.

"Uh....." She let out her breath.

And murmured.

"Damn."

(What a detestable way to die, out here,) but her body refused to move. The Kei that flew out of her with her blood showed no signs of reviving. Having lost too much blood, she hadn't the strength to consider how to reactivate her flow of Kei. Perhaps that was why she could watch what happened next with hazy calmness.

All movement ceased.

Temperature lower than zero descended onto the entire battlefield. In Nina's eyes, the stirring of air particles seemed to have stopped, as if the coldness had frozen the water vapor in the larvae's bodies, halting their movements.

The entire world was holding its breath for what was to come.

At first, the scene was of it falling apart.

The larva closing in on Nina had been split apart.

Its huge body broke in two. The upper part fell off, its simple innards tumbling out from beneath the severed shell. Thick green liquid sprayed, its smell stinging Nina's nose.

And the larva behind that was also split apart.

And then the next, and the next.....

And the next, and the next, and the next, and

next, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, was split in half and they tumbled to the ground as lumps of meat.

In the blink of an eye, the corner where the larvae had gathered became desolate.

"What....."

What had happened?

Nina did all she could to support her body and remain conscious. What was it, that could so easily break through the hard shells of the larvae?

She didn't see what it was.

But the changing atmosphere.....

An indescribable feeling filled the area. A feeling of something strong, like a heart drumming. The beat of flowing blood hovered in the air.

Was it this feeling that had wiped out all of the larvae?

It didn't feel real. The haziness in her brain was reality.

Someone dragged her aside. Could be someone from her team. That person dragged her to the back and pulled her onto a stretcher.

She weakly pushed away the medical student from her.

"Retreat, you fool!" the voice of the Student President resonated through the air.

"We're entering the final phase. All Military Arts students, follow my instructions and retreat behind the fence."

Searching for the source of that voice, Nina saw petal-like things floating in the air.

"Flakes?"

They were the flakes that a Psychokinesist used. The flakes could analyze information from their surroundings and transmit messages from far away.

Who was controlling the flakes?

(The Student President.....) But what surfaced in her mind was his sister. Was she actually with the Student President?

"Are you all right?"

The voice came from the flakes.

"Layfon?"

"Yes. Please leave now."

"Wait. Did you do that? Just what did you do?"

"I don't have time to explain. The countdown's about to begin."

He repeated. "Listen carefully. You must retreat to the area within the fence. There wasn't time to make minute adjustments, so I might not be able to control it as well. Worse comes to worse, this could tear up even the Student President."

"Wait!" she shouted, but Layfon didn't reply.

The flakes lifted into the air and flew outside the city.

"Countdown begins," came the voice of the Student President.

Nina pushed away the medical student, hard. Her brain had cleared a little. As the person responsible for this section, she couldn't retreat into the back. She must coordinate with the countdown and make sure everyone has evacuated. Besides, she wanted to see what Layfon was about to do with her own eyes.

Because he was her subordinate.

Reproving her swaying body, she stayed rooted to the spot, watching the larvae before her.

Felli stood alone on the rooftop of a dormitory for senior students, not wanting to enter the command tower. She watched the sky

with eyes closed. She hadn't lifted her head. The images from the sky surfaced in her mind, conveyed by the flakes.

Thick cloud cover floated in the north, blocking the moonlight.

And on that piece of land were Zuellni's legs, trapped in the scarlet, filthy earth, surrounded by countless numbers of larvae.

Nine hundred and eighty-two.

"That's a small number. I fought more than ten thousand larvae at Grendan once."

Layfon's voice was sober. The horror of those larvae made it difficult to breath. A breath escaped from Felli's lips.

She opened her eyes.

To her left was the command tower.

The flag of the Academy City fluttered in the wind, revealing the drawing of a girl, Zuellni, and a fountain pen.

A person stood beside that flag.

Layfon.

The dim light outlined his silhouette. All of the flakes had scattered outside Zuellni. Only one flake remained to keep contact between Felli and Layfon.

As she couldn't make him out under the insufficient light, she used the flake to confirm his location. Out of the many images overlapping each other in her mind, she plucked out the image of Layfon.

Dim light. The artificial light of Zuellni illuminated Layfon's shadow.

Something felt different about that face.

The Layfon Felli knew always wore a troubled expression. Tense gaze, an unnatural feeling that he never attempted to hide, of knowing he shouldn't be where he was. That was the Layfon she knew.

On the top of the tower, Layfon's line of vision hovered on the outskirts of the city – the earth filled with filth monsters. The vision of a normal person would be unable to make out what went on in the darkness outside the city. But what about the Layfon now ?

The way he stared faraway was like he had confirmed something.

(Good.)

"Senpai, have you found it yet?"

"......Not yet."

To reply, she swallowed what she was about to say. Her face was hot. What was she thinking, looking at him? As if to toss away her shyness, she switched off Layfon's image and went to check all of the other images.

The hovering flakes brought back information to her through many means. Vision reflected by light, infrared rays, ultrasound, etc. She searched for Layfon's target through what humans didn't originally possess.

To possess strong Psychokinesis was not enough to be called a genius.

Felli was a genius because she could process a massive amount of information simultaneously.

"Please hurry. I can destroy as many larvae as I like, but it'll be hard even for me if the mother calls for reinforcements."

"I know."

The voice of the Student President counting down drifted over. From ten down to one. Felli increased her processing pace. Ultrasound could not pierce the ground, so she made the flakes enter the crack where Zuellni's legs were, heading deeper into the depths of the earth. At the same time, she searched above the ground through infrared rays. She filtered through the heat sources of numerous larvae, and using Layfon's information as the basis, extended her search for a bigger heat signal.

At last.....when the countdown reached "Two".

"Found it. Heading 1305. Distance, 30 Kilomel. Depth, 12 Mel. I'll lead you in."

"I'm counting on you."

Zero.

What will happen when the signal goes off..... At the end of Felli's thought was Layfon.

But he remained immobile, gazing straight ahead with the Dite held tightly in his hand.

The flakes conveyed their search results to Felli.

Nine hundred and eighty-two. Nine hundred and sixty-five. Nine hundred and three. Eight hundred and seventy-seven. Eight hundred and thirty-three. Seven hundred and seventy-eight. Six hundred and ninety-one.....The red lights of the larvae were snuffed out one after another.

Four hundred and seventy-seven. Three hundred and sixty-five. Two hundred and twenty-three. One hundred and ninety-eight. One hundred and fifty-seven. One hundred and two. Ninety-nine.. ....The huge number that had exhausted all of the Military Arts

Students was greatly reduced over a short period of time. Felli didn't want to confirm with the images. The moment that Layfon saved Nina was too tense for her.

She looked at him again.

He had Restored his Dite.

A strange looking weapon with only a handle.

"What's important is control. Once you have the key, even senpai could be so much better than me," he said.

But she truly doubted whether she could exhibit such power.

The Dite held another form of Restoration that Harley had adjusted.

It wasn't just a handle. Countless numbers of long, thin threads hung from the tip of the handle, so fine that one couldn't distinguish them with the naked eye.

A weapon of steel threads. The pressure and friction of a normal string could cut through flesh. The threads were enough to be a murdering weapon.

Layfon deftly controlled the threads, as if they were a part of him. The threads spread across the edges of the city, tearing up the larvae.

Ninety-eight. Ninety-seven. Ninety-six. Ninety-five. Ninety-four. Ninety-three. Ninety-two. Ninety-one. Ninety.....

The threads targeted their prey with shocking speed. The disappearing red dots were another countdown to Felli. She must find the mother before all the lights disappeared. If not, the mother would call over any filth monsters in the surrounding area and Zuellni would become a feast for the young of other filth monsters. The filth monsters' determination to extend the survival of one's kin sank Zuellni deeper into its current crisis.

If Felli couldn't find the mother.....

Fifty-six. Fifty-five. Fifty-four. Fifty-three. Fifty-two. Fifty-one. Fifty.....

Her consciousness flew alongside the flakes deep in the earth. Deeper and deeper, flowing through the twisted caverns and snake-like corridors.

There.

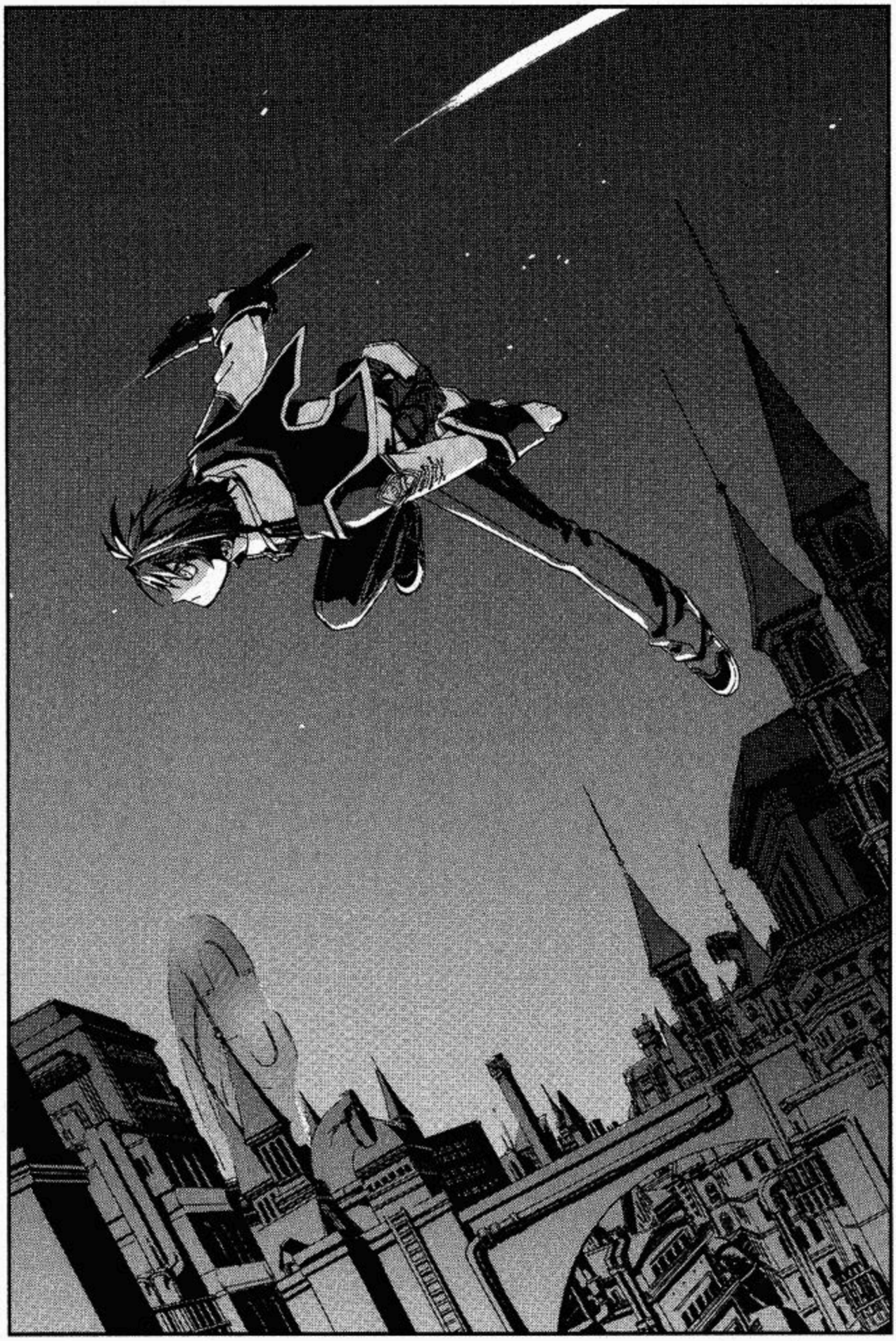
A huge and ugly abdomen. The body of the mother as if it was dead. A huge heat signal.

"I found it. I'll lead you over."

"Thanks."

As he replied, he disappeared from the tower.

To fly in the air.



No, not flying. He was probably pulling himself over, using one of the threads as an anchor. Through the Kei in his legs, he sped from the center of the city to its outskirts. While flying through the air, he continued to control the threads. The number of larvae was reduced to zero when he reached the edge of the city.

Felli sent another flake to his side.

"You have five minutes. Your lungs won't hold beyond that."

"I know."

His soft reply worried her. Humans could not live long on the polluted earth outside the city. The pollutant floating in the air would rot one's lungs.

She didn't understand why he was risking his life. Because of his ability? The ability that'd only bring him danger.....

"He doesn't want to do this," she said to no one.

It was for others, and also for himself.

Felli couldn't understand his naive thinking.

But.....

"Please don't die," she said to his image through the flake.

She didn't send the words to him.

He felt sticky the moment he left the air shield.

Layfon leaped down from the very edge of the city. He controlled the threads and set them as anchor points, using them to lower himself down into the crack of the earth. He minimized contact with the ground and kept his breathing shallow.

Soil particles fell into his eyes, causing intense pain. The pollutant ate at his flesh. He squinted, and tears filled his eyes. He regretted not bringing a mask with him. Did they have it in Zuellni ? Perhaps the Mechanical Department would have some.

The Kei-filled threads replaced his nervous system and led him through the dark cavern. He chased after one of the threads wrapped around his guide, a flake.

Humidity came through the threads. The moisture in the air was laced with pollutants. Even the skin beneath his uniform felt pain.

How much time did he have left?

Pain flared from deep inside his throat. It wasn't possible to completely stop the seepage of pollutant, even though he kept his

breathing as shallow as he could. If he held his breath, then he couldn't create Kei. He had never managed to get used to the anxiety and irritation that arose from fighting filth monsters.

No matter how many times he had done it.

A world not habitable to humans.

What a harsh world.

The world was cruel to the people living in sealed off cities, who could only communicate with the outside world through the danger that hid in the shadow of the roaming bus. Yet humans continued to live in this world. A world that did not permit their existence.

But they had to pay a price to keep on living.....

The pain reached his lungs, and he could feel the juice in his stomach flowing backward into his throat. If this feeling became more intense, so intense that he couldn't bear it, then everything would be over.

Considering the time he had spent getting here, he probably only had one minute left.

"The mother's right behind this last corner," Felli said.

He flew around the corner, released all the threads and turned the Dite back to its original form. A normal Dite.

He opened his eyes. He was standing on humid earth.

And before him was the mother form of a filth monster.

Her abdomen was two-thirds of its bulky body. The body had been damaged. The uterus in the abdomen was where the larvae were nurtured. Earth buried the immobile wings above its shell. In its head, so much larger than a larva's, was a compound eye. Its jaw was half closed, as if it was breathing out its last breath. The sound of friction caused by the shells grinding against each other filled the cavern.

"Restoration 01."

The Dite restored into the blue green sword.

"Perhaps, our will to live is the same."

Without fearing the waste of breath, Layfon talked to the mother.

"Perhaps, the feelings of not wanting to die is the same."

Layfon strode towards the mother while talking. Every step increased the light of Kei in the blade, driving back the darkness.

"Those people who aren't satisfied with that alone, are probably too rich."

The filth monsters who had adapted to the polluted earth might be the masters of this world. According to history, when humans didn't have to rely on Regios, they did whatever they wanted as masters of this world. The fact that humans could only survive in

artificial worlds in this era meant the filth monsters had risen to become the new conquerors.

Whether the mother had discovered Layfon or had sensed danger from Layfon's Kei, its jaw started to close and open rapidly, and the sound of friction deepened.

The mother was about to call for reinforcements.

"But we still want to live on," Layfon said in a low voice and raised his sword.

"I don't plan to apologize."

The blade swung down.

Epilogue

In the silence, Nina stood rooted on the spot.

Before her lay the decapitated corpses of the larvae. No one at the scene understood what had happened.

The medical students were the first to collect themselves. They started to work on the injured.

The medical student who had dragged Nina back applied antiseptic liquid, haemostatic and cell regeneration gel to her wound. He then bandaged the wound, not too gently.

What had happened?

Only a few minutes had passed since the Student President began the countdown. No one else had done anything, yet the larvae were torn apart one after another.

Did Layfon do this?

Probably. She shivered. Was this due to her blood loss? Or excitement.....

Or fear?

Extraordinary skill. Was this what a Heaven's Blade successor was like? She thought of this as she pressed down, hard, on the trembling of her body with her right wrist.

The students who didn't know anything began to move. Some shouted in shock. Others were joyful for being alive.

Yes, they should be happy.

She tried to think along those lines.

Damage was minimized because of Layfon. She didn't plan to deny that point. As long as Layfon was here, they could safely win the next Military Arts competition.

But, was this really okay?

To resolve a crisis by relying entirely on one strong person?

If she had lost her life, she wouldn't be here, thinking like this now. Without Layfon's help, she would've died already.

He wasn't proud of his exceptional skills in the Military Arts, and his viewpoint was totally different from everyone else's.

She didn't think the way he thought was totally wrong. The former Nina, who didn't have to worry about money, could never understand, but now she could. She understood because she also had to work to pay for her own school and living fees.

But.....

"No, what am I thinking?"

She turned around, about to give the retreat order.

And her gaze came across him.

"Layfon....."

Layfon stood on the edge of the city, on the other side of the larvae corpses.

He wasn't there before.

He had just flown up from the ground, using one of the wires. It looked as if he had just jumped up one step to stand on Zuellni's edge.

No words came from Nina.

"Ah, it's great that you're okay, Senpai."

He staggered to her, his appearance appallingly terrible.

His face and part of his arm not covered by the uniform was swollen red. His eyes were all red and tears tracked down his cheeks.

"This.....?"

"Sorry, I ran too far from the city."

So he was in pain, but his smile looked more like a spasm.

"If I hadn't destroyed the mother, other filth monsters would have come....."

As if he was shyly.....No, looking at him trying to smile and break the awkward atmosphere, she felt her thoughts were too foolish.

"You were stupid. We have gear tailored for combat outside!"

"Eh!? Really!"

"Of course. This might be an Academy City, but even so, it's a famous one. You can find standard equipment here."

His dumbstruck expression looked ridiculous. She laughed. And he also smiled, if only a bit sourly.

Then.....

"Sorry, I'm a bit tired. Let me rest a bit," he said, and toppled.

"Hey!"

She supported him, but he showed no signs of waking up. As she herself was weak from blood loss, she also fell, unable to fully support his weight.

"H-Hey, you shouldn't sleep in such a place!"

He hadn't planned to, but Layfon was using Nina's chest as a pillow.

Though she looked flustered from the pressure on top of her, she couldn't move.

"And you look so thin too.....You're heavy!"

No matter how much she pushed at him, he remained inert. For some reason, none of the medical students nearby came over to help. Angry, she struggled to get him off her.

The sound of peaceful snoring.

"Geez....." she sighed.

"Well, you did really well," she patted his hair that was roughened by soil.

He said he participated in the underground matches for money, but he risked his life in a fight that had nothing to do with it.

Wasn't this the right thing to do for a person trained in the Military Arts?

She herself probably hadn't discovered that Layfon's nature wasn't bad. He was just too honest.

To the level of rushing forward to do the right thing without harboring any doubt.

(If only I could do something for this guy.)

She thought as she patted his hair.

And.....

"Cough."

"Huh!? Aaahhhhh! Blood! He's vomiting blood! Stretcher! Get a stretcher over!" she shouted.

With Nina's panicked voice, the medical students finally stirred.

(So noisy.....)

Layfon thought, half asleep and half awake.

(Oh yes, I have to write a letter back to Leerin.)

The normal days might come.

And they should be more relaxing than the past.

He'd report everything to Leerin. As that thought fled, the background noise also fled, and he fell into a deep slumber.